MUSIC OF CHANCE

SUCCESS.

Project Gutenberg's *For Your Sweet Sake*, by James E. McGirt

Success is a light upon the farther shore,
That shines in dazzling splendor to the eye,
The waters leap, the surging billows roar,
And he who seeks the prize must leap and try.

A mighty host stand trembling on the brink,
With anxious eyes they yearn to reach the goal.
I see them leap, and, ah! I see them sink--
As gazing on dread horror fills my soul!

Yet to despair I can but droop and die,
'Tis better far to try the lashing deep.
I much prefer beneath the surge to lie,
Than death to find me on this bank asleep.

YOU CANNOT HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Circular Saws*, by Humbert Wolfe

A certain business-man in Damascus, whose efficiency was only surpassed by his personal ugliness, was informed that in a distant vilayet dwelt a peasant of whom it was currently rumoured that he possessed a goose that laid eggs of pure gold.

He accordingly chartered a caravan, and with much jingling of silver bells set out across the desert to make a proposition to the peasant. In his company was a young man who was reputed (though it had not been finally brought home to him) to be a poet. Whether this were true or no, it cannot be denied that he paid much heed to the ascensions of the moon.

On the third day of the pilgrimage that pale planet was bewitching in her pensive hair the reluctant black beauty of the desert. All was still except when a grave camel kneeling shook a bell. But presently, with the clear monotony of a bird, the young man's voice was heard singing:

"In this cold glory
of midnight, day
and her fever
have passed away.

"Here in the quiet,
here in the cool,
even pain, even sorrow
are beautiful.

"And the voice of the poet
lifts and lingers
at one in the dark
with the older singers."

"As I feared," said the merchant, raising his head from his silken and tasselled pillow, "the fellow is a poet. I must cope with this." Thereupon he lifted the flap of his embroidered tent, and in a sleeping suit, of which the radiant texture did not conceal the irregular contours of his frame, with one arm behind his back, strode across the sand to where, in a patch of shadow, the poet was crooning.

"Young man," said the merchant, breaking somewhat harshly on the singer's reverie, "was that your own poem?"

“It was, merchant,” replied the poet, “but now, since you have heard it, it is yours also.”

“Tell me,” said the merchant craftily, “how much would you be paid for such a poem in Damascus?”

“If I were lucky,” said the poet, “I might earn a kiss, or if unlucky a dinah.”

“A dinah,” said the merchant. “By the beard of the Prophet, no bad pay for a mouthful of sweet words. And is it difficult to acquire the trick?”

“All that is needed,” answered the poet, “is a rose behind the ear and the moon behind the heart.”

“In Damascus,” cried the merchant, “I have a hanging garden stained with roses, and at night the moon rises in the garden. My ears are longer than yours, and my heart, if one may judge by a comparison of our persons, is incomparably larger. I will accordingly give up the quest of the goose, and will return to Damascus and in my rose garden lay my own golden eggs. But in the meantime,” he added reflectively, stabbing the poet to the heart with the pearl-handled scimitar which he had hitherto concealed, “I may as well dispose of a dangerous rival.”

“O fool,” whispered the dying poet, “it was only the goose who thought the eggs gold, because of the golden goslings hidden in their cool blue shell, as the peasant discovered when he killed her.”

“Why did she think so?” said the merchant, daintily wiping the curved blade.

“Because she was a poet,” whispered the dying man. “And why did she tell the peasant?” asked the merchant, preparing to return to his interrupted rest. “Because,” said the poet, turning over on his side with a little sigh, “because she was a goose.”

THE WORSHIPPERS

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *Bread and Circuses*, by Helen Parry Eden

When the young Spring in Betsey's fingers sets
The first white violets,
And she hath reared them in her soft brown fist,
Ev'n to my stooping mouth till they be kist:—
Shall I allow my kiss more fainly lingers
Among her baby fingers,
Where (for all pride of perfume that they shed),
The very violets be out-violetted?

Great is her portion whose auriferous mines
Yield new-coin'd celandines,
Her dowry hoarded in the hedge-row's heart
Till the March wind hath blown the buds apart;
For her delight these gay-wrought tassels be
By name Dog's Mercury,
For her delight I scour from wood to wood,
Lured by one lode-star with her Babyhood.

Dare I avow then, Betsey, that your grove
Hath not mine only love?
Have we not quit a brave and bustling world
For catkins and the cuckoo-pint uncurl'd?
So, while your wind-blown cheek to mine you press,
I know you'll never guess
Whereto my woodland incense I prefer—
And that I worship you, dear worshipper.

THE NEW SECRETARY OF THE PRETZEL-PAINTERS' UNION

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Dust of New York*, by Konrad Bercovici

The Pretzel-Painters' Union had emerged victoriously from their last strike. The Pretzel eating population of the city had refused to eat Pretzels that were not glazed by the expert hand of a capable expert in the art of pretzel painting--the beer-drinking population refused to drink beer in saloons where dull pretzels were offered and capital had to yield to labor. Organized labor was triumphant. The pretzel painters who had worked fourteen hours a day for ten dollars a week before the strike, won a ten-hour day, an increase of two dollars a week, as well as official recognition of their Union.

The Union consisted of twenty members, all of whom, except one, were officials of the organization. The officials numbered a president, two vice presidents, a recording secretary and a financial secretary, a treasurer, three controllers, a house committee of five, an organizer and three trustees. The total income of the Union from dues never amounted to more than three dollars a week, but this was supplemented by the income from the yearly Pretzel-Painters' concert and ball every winter, and from the picnic every summer.

After the strike was won the members felt the necessity of solidarity more than ever. This feeling brought them together twice every week to discuss Union matters and matters of private concern. But after a while, when they had exhausted all possible subjects and the Union was running smoothly, the organizer had difficulty getting even the legal quorum together once every second week. The organizer knew from experience what such negligence caused.

The collection of dues had already diminished perceptibly. Some of the members were in arrears with five and six weeks. Fifteen cents a week is comparatively easy to pay, but when the sum is over a dollar and the pay is twelve dollars a week--it's a different story! The Pretzel-Painters' Local was in great danger.

The organizer began to feel that non-union pretzel-painters were shining the beer drinkers' delicacy. He called meeting after meeting and described passionately to the four or five old men present the great fight between Labor and Capital in general and the battle their own Union had won; the high price paid for what they already had gained through solid organization, but it was all in vain; the others did not come. They owed too much for dues and fines.

Finally the organizer hit upon a great idea. "The Pretzel-Painters' Union has to be reorganized," he wrote to all the members.

It was a new thing, that word "reorganized." It was something worth while finding out about. "We must reorganize or our organization goes to pieces," he wrote to them. That Wednesday evening was a gala evening. The financial secretary had never taken in so much money at once; twenty-six dollars in one evening! They all paid up to the minute; because it was explained in the letter that only members with paid-up dues had a vote in the reorganization of the mighty Pretzel-Painters' Union.

The Pretzel-Painters' Union was not without its inner dissensions. There was a group of Galician Jews and a group of Russian Jews always fighting one another; and both groups fought whatever the group of Roumanian Jews proposed. There were also two old Portuguese Jews; and whatever they wanted carried through was sure to be defeated by the above-mentioned three groups.

But the Russian group was always the deciding factor. By themselves alone they were the majority of the organization.

After the secretary had announced that everybody was present and paid up to the minute, the chairman, Mr. Bindzel, opened the meeting and asked the organizer to explain the cry of distress.

"Mr. Chairman and brothers," the organizer began, "we must reorganize or we go to pieces. Already the Hinshel Company employs two non-union pretzel painters. If we don't reorganize they will break our Union. We must uphold the rights of labor or the heel of capitalism will crush us----"

He spoke well into the night and urged them with tears in his eyes and a proper catch in the voice to stand by the flag of their class.

The silence was very impressive when the organizer finished and sat down to wipe his perspiring face. No one spoke a word. The chairman did not want to break the silence. He felt the greatness of the moment.

Finally brother Kessler said:

"Mr. Chairman!"

"Brother Kessler has the floor."

Brother Kessler, of the Galician group, seldom took the floor. So everybody was astonished that he of all others should want to speak.

"Mr. Chairman and Brothers.... Mr. Chairman. Of course, we want to reorganize, but we don't know how to do it."

"Well said! Go ahead Brother Kessler!" several voices were heard at once.

Kessler took heart.

"We are Pretzel Painters. We are proud of our Union, are strong for our Union, and we want to protect it. Let Brother Kirshen, our organizer, tell us how."

"Sure, Kessler is right. Let Brother Kirshen tell us how," came voices from everywhere.

"Order, please!" the chairman called. "This is an important meeting. On it depends the battle between Labor and Capital. Order, please. Brother Kirshen has the floor."

Brother Kirshen, aglow from his recent triumph, took the centre of the platform.

"The first thing to do to reorganize our Union is to elect new officers. I make therefore a motion that we elect new officers."

"Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman," several called out.

"That's a political trick," called out the Roumanian group in one voice.

"Order, please!" yelled the chairman. The heavy gavel came down upon the table.

Everybody was soon seated.

"I make an amendment to the motion," Kessler said.

"Sit down, Brother Kessler, we must proceed regularly. The Pretzel-Painters' Union has a constitution. We will proceed according to its constitution. The constitution of the Pretzel-Painters' Union says that when a motion is put before the house, it is first voted upon before any amendments are discussed. Does anybody want to speak on the motion?"

"Then, I propose that the motion be voted upon without debates because it is late and they will soon put out the lights in the house," said Kessler.

"Politics, politics," the Portuguese group cried. "Traitor, traitor," came from another group. But when Kessler's proposal was voted upon he had a majority. The Russian group voted with him. And so it happened that the nineteen officers of the Pretzel-Painters' Union were shifted around.

The chairman became the treasurer and so forth. But when it came to vote upon the secretaryship, Kessler, who had hitherto been the twentieth of the Union, the only member who had been without an office, was elected Secretary of the Pretzel-Painters' Union, because he was backed by the Russian group.

The following evening Kessler was the first to appear at the local of the Union. A little later the dethroned official appeared. They did not even greet one another. Kirshen, the organizer, was the third man to come.

"Brother Grumberg," he said to the former secretary, "would you please give over the books to brother Kessler and show him what he has to do?"

Grumberg took out from a drawer the two books of the Union and was ready to explain the work.

"But by God! In God's name! What do you want me to do with these books?" Kessler cried.

"Record the meetings, brother Kessler, write down what takes place," Grumberg said.

"What?" the new Secretary called out horror-stricken. "I--write? How should I write? I don't write--I don't know how to write--never did. What do you want with my life--what?"

"For God's sake, Kessler! If you cannot read and write why did you accept the nomination for the secretaryship?" the organizer asked angrily. But Kessler was defiant.

"Well, how and from where did you want me to know that a secretary must know to read and write?"

Kessler's resignation and the election of a new secretary brought the organization on the brink of ruin. And if it would not have been for the superior generalship of organizer Kirshen the Pretzel-Painters' Union would have been crushed under the heel of capitalism.

A SERVANT TO SERVANTS

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *North of Boston*, by Robert Frost

I DIDN'T make you know how glad I was
To have you come and camp here on our land.
I promised myself to get down some day
And see the way you lived, but I don't know!
With a houseful of hungry men to feed
I guess you'd find.... It seems to me
I can't express my feelings any more
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
Did ever you feel so? I hope you never.
It's got so I don't even know for sure
Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.
There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,
And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong.
You take the lake. I look and look at it.
I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water.
I stand and make myself repeat out loud
The advantages it has, so long and narrow,
Like a deep piece of some old running river
Cut short off at both ends. It lies five miles
Straight away through the mountain notch
From the sink window where I wash the plates,
And all our storms come up toward the house,
Drawing the slow waves whiter and whiter and whiter.
It took my mind off doughnuts and soda biscuit
To step outdoors and take the water dazzle
A sunny morning, or take the rising wind
About my face and body and through my wrapper,
When a storm threatened from the Dragon's Den,
And a cold chill shivered across the lake.
I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water,
Our Willoughby! How did you hear of it?
I expect, though, everyone's heard of it.
In a book about ferns? Listen to that!
You let things more like feathers regulate
Your going and coming. And you like it here?
I can see how you might. But I don't know!
It would be different if more people came,
For then there would be business. As it is,
The cottages Len built, sometimes we rent them,
Sometimes we don't. We've a good piece of shore
That ought to be worth something, and may yet.

But I don't count on it as much as Len.
He looks on the bright side of everything,
Including me. He thinks I'll be all right
With doctoring. But it's not medicine--
Lowe is the only doctor's dared to say so--
It's rest I want--there, I have said it out--
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them--from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done.
By good rights I ought not to have so much
Put on me, but there seems no other way.
Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
He says the best way out is always through.
And I agree to that, or in so far
As that I can see no way out but through--
Leastways for me--and then they'll be convinced.
It's not that Len don't want the best for me.
It was his plan our moving over in
Beside the lake from where that day I showed you
We used to live--ten miles from anywhere.
We didn't change without some sacrifice,
But Len went at it to make up the loss.
His work's a man's, of course, from sun to sun,
But he works when he works as hard as I do--
Though there's small profit in comparisons.
(Women and men will make them all the same.)
But work ain't all. Len undertakes too much.
He's into everything in town. This year
It's highways, and he's got too many men
Around him to look after that make waste.
They take advantage of him shamefully,
And proud, too, of themselves for doing so.
We have four here to board, great good-for-nothings,
Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk
While I fry their bacon. Much they care!
No more put out in what they do or say
Than if I wasn't in the room at all.
Coming and going all the time, they are:
I don't learn what their names are, let alone
Their characters, or whether they are safe
To have inside the house with doors unlocked.
I'm not afraid of them, though, if they're not
Afraid of me. There's two can play at that.
I have my fancies: it runs in the family.
My father's brother wasn't right. They kept him
Locked up for years back there at the old farm.
I've been away once--yes, I've been away.
The State Asylum. I was prejudiced;
I wouldn't have sent anyone of mine there;

You know the old idea--the only asylum
Was the poorhouse, and those who could afford,
Rather than send their folks to such a place,
Kept them at home; and it does seem more human.
But it's not so: the place is the asylum.
There they have every means proper to do with,
And you aren't darkening other people's lives--
Worse than no good to them, and they no good
To you in your condition; you can't know
Affection or the want of it in that state.
I've heard too much of the old-fashioned way.
My father's brother, he went mad quite young.
Some thought he had been bitten by a dog,
Because his violence took on the form
Of carrying his pillow in his teeth;
But it's more likely he was crossed in love,
Or so the story goes. It was some girl.
Anyway all he talked about was love.
They soon saw he would do someone a mischief
If he wa'n't kept strict watch of, and it ended
In father's building him a sort of cage,
Or room within a room, of hickory poles,
Like stanchions in the barn, from floor to ceiling,--
A narrow passage all the way around.
Anything they put in for furniture
He'd tear to pieces, even a bed to lie on.
So they made the place comfortable with straw,
Like a beast's stall, to ease their consciences.
Of course they had to feed him without dishes.
They tried to keep him clothed, but he paraded
With his clothes on his arm--all of his clothes.
Cruel--it sounds. I 'spose they did the best
They knew. And just when he was at the height,
Father and mother married, and mother came,
A bride, to help take care of such a creature,
And accommodate her young life to his.
That was what marrying father meant to her.
She had to lie and hear love things made dreadful
By his shouts in the night. He'd shout and shout
Until the strength was shouted out of him,
And his voice died down slowly from exhaustion.
He'd pull his bars apart like bow and bow-string,
And let them go and make them twang until
His hands had worn them smooth as any ox-bow.
And then he'd crow as if he thought that child's play--
The only fun he had. I've heard them say, though,
They found a way to put a stop to it.
He was before my time--I never saw him;
But the pen stayed exactly as it was

There in the upper chamber in the ell,
A sort of catch-all full of attic clutter.
I often think of the smooth hickory bars.
It got so I would say--you know, half fooling--
"It's time I took my turn upstairs in jail"--
Just as you will till it becomes a habit.
No wonder I was glad to get away.
Mind you, I waited till Len said the word.
I didn't want the blame if things went wrong.
I was glad though, no end, when we moved out,
And I looked to be happy, and I was,
As I said, for a while--but I don't know!
Somehow the change wore out like a prescription.
And there's more to it than just window-views
And living by a lake. I'm past such help--
Unless Len took the notion, which he won't,
And I won't ask him--it's not sure enough.
I 'spose I've got to go the road I'm going:
Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?
I almost think if I could do like you,
Drop everything and live out on the ground--
But it might be, come night, I shouldn't like it,
Or a long rain. I should soon get enough,
And be glad of a good roof overhead.
I've lain awake thinking of you, I'll warrant,
More than you have yourself, some of these nights.
The wonder was the tents weren't snatched away
From over you as you lay in your beds.
I haven't courage for a risk like that.
Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work,
But the thing of it is, I need to be kept.
There's work enough to do--there's always that;
But behind's behind. The worst that you can do
Is set me back a little more behind.
I sha'n't catch up in this world, anyway.
I'd rather you'd not go unless you must.

THE MYSTERIOUS SKETCH

by

Erckmann-Chatrian

I

Opposite the chapel of Saint Sebalt in Nuremberg, at the corner of Trabaus Street, there stands a little tavern, tall and narrow, with a toothed gable and dusty windows, whose roof is surmounted by a plaster Virgin. It was there that I spent the unhappiest days of my life. I had gone to Nuremberg to study the old German masters; but in default of ready money, I had to paint portraits--and such portraits! Fat old women with their cats on their laps, big-wigged aldermen, burgomasters in three-cornered hats--all horribly bright with ochre and vermilion. From portraits I descended to sketches, and from sketches to silhouettes.

Nothing is more annoying than to have your landlord come to you every day with pinched lips, shrill voice, and impudent manner to say: "Well, sir, how soon are you going to pay me? Do you know how much your bill is? No; that doesn't worry you! You eat, drink, and sleep calmly enough. God feeds the sparrows. Your bill now amounts to two hundred florins and ten kreutzers--it is not worth talking about."

Those who have not heard any one talk in this way can form no idea of it; love of art, imagination, and the sacred enthusiasm for the beautiful are blasted by the breath of such an attack. You become awkward and timid; all your energy evaporates, as well as your feeling of personal dignity, and you bow respectfully at a distance to the burgomaster Schneegans.

One night, not having a sou, as usual, and threatened with imprisonment by this worthy Mister Rap, I determined to make him a bankrupt by cutting my throat. Seated on my narrow bed, opposite the window, in this agreeable mood, I gave myself up to a thousand philosophical reflections, more or less comforting.

"What is man?" I asked myself. "An omnivorous animal; his jaws, provided with canines, incisors, and molars, prove it. The canines are made to tear meat; the incisors to bite fruits; and the molars to masticate, grind, and triturate animal and vegetable substances that are pleasant to smell and to taste. But when he has nothing to masticate, this being is an absurdity in Nature, a superfluity, a fifth wheel to the coach."

Such were my reflections. I dared not open my razor for fear that the invincible force of my logic would inspire me with the courage to make an end of it all. After having argued so finely, I blew out my candle,

postponing the sequel till the morrow.

That abominable Rap had completely stupefied me. I could do nothing but silhouettes, and my sole desire was to have some money to rid myself of his odious presence. But on this night a singular change came over my mind. I awoke about one o'clock--I lit my lamp, and, enveloping myself in my grey gabardine, I drew upon the paper a rapid sketch after the Dutch school--something strange and bizarre, which had not the slightest resemblance to my ordinary conceptions.

Imagine a dreary courtyard enclosed by high dilapidated walls. These walls are furnished with hooks, seven or eight feet from the ground. You see, at a glance, that it is a butchery.

On the left, there extends a lattice structure; you perceive through it a quartered beef suspended from the roof by enormous pulleys. Great pools of blood run over the flagstones and unite in a ditch full of refuse.

The light falls from above, between the chimneys where the weathercocks stand out from a bit of the sky the size of your hand, and the roofs of the neighbouring houses throw bold shadows from story to story.

At the back of this place is a shed, beneath the shed a pile of wood, and upon the pile of wood some ladders, a few bundles of straw, some coils of rope, a chicken-coop, and an old dilapidated rabbit-hutch.

How did these heterogeneous details suggest themselves to my imagination? I don't know; I had no reminiscences, and yet every stroke of the pencil seemed the result of observation, and strange because it was all so true. Nothing was lacking.

But on the right, one corner of the sketch remained a blank. I did not know what to put there.... Something suddenly seemed to writhe there, to move! Then I saw a foot, the sole of a foot. Notwithstanding this improbable position, I followed my inspiration without reference to my own criticism. This foot was joined to a leg--over this leg, stretched out with effort, there soon floated the skirt of a dress. In short, there appeared by degrees an old woman, pale, dishevelled, and wasted, thrown down at the side of a well, and struggling to free herself from a hand that clutched her throat.

It was a murder scene that I was drawing. The pencil fell from my hand.

This woman, in the boldest attitude, with her thighs bent on the curb of the well, her face contracted by terror, and her two hands grasping the murderer's arm, frightened me. I could not look at her. But the man--he, the person to whom that arm belonged--I could not see him. It was impossible for me to finish the sketch.

"I am tired," I said, my forehead dripping with perspiration; "there is only this figure to do; I will finish it tomorrow. It will be easy then."

And again I went to bed, thoroughly frightened by my vision.

The next morning, I got up very early. I was dressing in order to resume my interrupted work, when two little knocks were heard on my door.

"Come in!"

The door opened. An old man, tall, thin, and dressed in black, appeared on the threshold. This man's face, his eyes set close together and his large nose like the beak of an eagle, surmounted by a high bony forehead, had something severe about it. He bowed to me gravely.

"Mister Christian Vénius, the painter?" said he.

"That is my name, sir."

He bowed again, adding:

"The Baron Frederick Van Spreckdal."

The appearance of the rich amateur, Van Spreckdal, judge of the criminal court, in my poor lodging, greatly disturbed me. I could not help throwing a stealthy glance at my old worm-eaten furniture, my damp hangings and my dusty floor. I felt humiliated by such dilapidation; but Van Spreckdal did not seem to take any account of these details; and sitting down at my little table:

"Mister Vénius," he resumed, "I come----" But at this instant his glance fell upon the unfinished sketch--he did not finish his phrase.

I was sitting on the edge of my little bed; and the sudden attention that this personage bestowed upon one of my productions made my heart beat with an indefinable apprehension.

At the end of a minute, Van Spreckdal lifted his head:

"Are you the author of that sketch?" he asked me with an intent look.

"Yes, sir."

"What is the price of it?"

"I never sell my sketches. It is the plan for a picture."

"Ah!" said he, picking up the paper with the tips of his long yellow fingers.

He took a lens from his waistcoat pocket and began to study the design in silence.

The sun was now shining obliquely into the garret. Van Spreckdal never said a word; the hook of his immense nose increased, his heavy eyebrows contracted, and his long pointed chin took a turn upward, making a thousand little wrinkles in his long, thin cheeks. The silence was so profound that I could distinctly hear the plaintive buzzing of a fly that had been caught in a spider's web.

"And the dimensions of this picture, Mister Vénius?" he said without looking at me.

"Three feet by four."

"The price?"

"Fifty ducats."

Van Spreckdal laid the sketch on the table, and drew from his pocket a large purse of green silk shaped like a pear; he drew the rings of it----

"Fifty ducats," said he, "here they are."

I was simply dazzled.

The Baron rose and bowed to me, and I heard his big ivory-headed cane resounding on each step until he reached the bottom of the stairs. Then recovering from my stupour, I suddenly remembered that I had not thanked him, and I flew down the five flights like lightning; but when I reached the bottom, I looked to the right and left; the street was deserted.

"Well," I said, "this is strange."

And I went upstairs again all out of breath.

II

The surprising way in which Van Spreckdal had appeared to me threw me into deep wonderment. "Yesterday," I said to myself, as I contemplated the pile of ducats glittering in the sun, "yesterday I formed the wicked intention of cutting my throat, all for the want of a few miserable florins, and now today Fortune has showered them from the clouds. Indeed it was fortunate that I did not open my razor; and, if the same

temptation ever comes to me again, I will take care to wait until the morrow."

After making these judicious reflections, I sat down to finish the sketch; four strokes of the pencil and it would be finished. But here an incomprehensible difficulty awaited me. It was impossible for me to take those four sweeps of the pencil; I had lost the thread of my inspiration, and the mysterious personage no longer stood out in my brain. I tried in vain to evoke him, to sketch him, and to recover him; he no more accorded with the surroundings than with a figure by Raphael in a Teniers inn-kitchen. I broke out into a profuse perspiration.

At this moment, Rap opened the door without knocking, according to his praiseworthy custom. His eyes fell upon my pile of ducats and in a shrill voice he cried:

"Eh! eh! so I catch you. Will you still persist in telling me, Mr. Painter, that you have no money?"

And his hooked fingers advanced with that nervous trembling that the sight of gold always produces in a miser.

For a few seconds I was stupefied.

The memory of all the indignities that this individual had inflicted upon me, his covetous look, and his impudent smile exasperated me. With a single bound, I caught hold of him, and pushed him out of the room, slamming the door in his face.

This was done with the crack and rapidity of a spring snuff-box.

But from outside the old usurer screamed like an eagle:

"My money, you thief, my money!"

The lodgers came out of their rooms, asking:

"What is the matter? What has happened?"

I opened the door suddenly and quickly gave Mister Rap a kick in the spine that sent him rolling down more than twenty steps.

"That's what's the matter!" I cried, quite beside myself. Then I shut the door and bolted it, while bursts of laughter from the neighbours greeted Mister Rap in the passage.

I was satisfied with myself; I rubbed my hands together. This adventure had put new life into me; I resumed my work, and was about to finish the sketch when I heard an unusual noise.

Butts of muskets were grounded on the pavement. I looked out of my window and saw three soldiers in full uniform with grounded arms in front of my door.

I said to myself in my terror: "Can it be that that scoundrel of a Rap has had any bones broken?"

And here is the strange peculiarity of the human mind: I, who the night before had wanted to cut my own throat, shook from head to foot, thinking that I might well be hanged if Rap were dead.

The stairway was filled with confused noises. It was an ascending flood of heavy footsteps, clanking arms, and short syllables.

Suddenly somebody tried to open my door. It was shut.

Then there was a general clamour.

"In the name of the law--open!"

I arose, trembling and weak in the knees.

"Open!" the same voice repeated.

I thought to escape over the roofs; but I had hardly put my head out of the little snuff-box window, when I drew back, seized with vertigo. I saw in a flash all the windows below with their shining panes, their flower-pots, their bird-cages, and their gratings. Lower, the balcony; still lower, the street-lamp; still lower again, the sign of the "Red Cask" framed in iron-work; and, finally, three glittering bayonets, only awaiting my fall to run me through the body from the sole of my foot to the crown of my head. On the roof of the opposite house a tortoise-shell cat was crouching behind a chimney, watching a band of sparrows fighting and scolding in the gutter.

One cannot imagine to what clearness, intensity, and rapidity the human eye acquires when stimulated by fear.

At the third summons I heard:

"Open, or we shall force it!"

Seeing that flight was impossible, I staggered to the door and drew the bolt.

Two hands immediately fell upon my collar. A dumpy, little man, smelling of wine, said:

"I arrest you!"

He wore a bottle-green redingote, buttoned to the chin, and a stovepipe hat. He had large brown whiskers, rings on every finger, and was named Passauf.

He was the chief of police.

Five bull-dogs with flat caps, noses like pistols, and lower jaws turning upward, observed me from outside.

"What do you want?" I asked Passauf.

"Come downstairs," he cried roughly, as he gave a sign to one of his men to seize me.

This man took hold of me, more dead than alive, while several other men turned my room upside down.

I went downstairs supported by the arms like a person in the last stages of consumption--with hair dishevelled and stumbling at every step.

They thrust me into a cab between two strong fellows, who charitably let me see the ends of their clubs, held to their wrists by a leather string--and then the carriage started off.

I heard behind us the feet of all the urchins of the town.

"What have I done?" I asked one of my keepers.

He looked at the other with a strange smile and said:

"Hans--he asks what he has done!"

That smile froze my blood.

Soon a deep shadow enveloped the carriage; the horses' hoofs resounded under an archway. We were entering the Raspelhaus. Of this place one might say:

> "Dans cet antre,
> Je vois fort bien comme l'on entre,
> Et ne vois point comme on en sort."

All is not rose-coloured in this world; from the claws of Rap I fell into a dungeon, from which very few poor devils have a chance to escape.

Large dark courtyards and rows of windows like a hospital, and furnished with gratings; not a sprig of verdure, not a festoon of ivy, not even a

weathercock in perspective--such was my new lodging. It was enough to make one tear his hair out by the roots.

The police officers, accompanied by the jailer, took me temporarily to a lock-up.

The jailer, if I remember rightly, was named Kasper Schlüssel; with his grey woollen cap, his pipe between his teeth, and his bunch of keys at his belt, he reminded me of the Owl-God of the Caribs. He had the same golden yellow eyes, that see in the dark, a nose like a comma, and a neck that was sunk between the shoulders.

Schlüssel shut me up as calmly as one locks up his socks in a cupboard, while thinking of something else. As for me, I stood for more than ten minutes with my hands behind my back and my head bowed. At the end of that time I made the following reflection: "When falling, Rap cried out, 'I am assassinated,' but he did not say by whom. I will say it was my neighbour, the old merchant with the spectacles: he will be hanged in my place."

This idea comforted my heart, and I drew a long breath. Then I looked about my prison. It seemed to have been newly whitewashed, and the walls were bare of designs, except in one corner, where a gallows had been crudely sketched by my predecessor. The light was admitted through a bull's-eye about nine or ten feet from the floor; the furniture consisted of a bundle of straw and a tub.

I sat down upon the straw with my hands around my knees in deep despondency. It was with great difficulty that I could think clearly; but suddenly imagining that Rap, before dying, had denounced me, my legs began to tingle, and I jumped up coughing, as if the hempen cord were already tightening around my neck.

At the same moment, I heard Schlüssel walking down the corridor; he opened the lock-up, and told me to follow him. He was still accompanied by the two officers, so I fell into step resolutely.

We walked down long galleries, lighted at intervals by small windows from within. Behind a grating I saw the famous Jic-Jack, who was going to be executed on the morrow. He had on a strait-jacket and sang out in a raucous voice:

"Je suis le roi de ces montagnes."

Seeing me, he called out:

"Eh! comrade! I'll keep a place for you at my right."

The two police officers and the Owl-God looked at each other and smiled,

while I felt the goose-flesh creep down the whole length of my back.

III

Schlüssel shoved me into a large and very dreary hall, with benches arranged in a semicircle. The appearance of this deserted hall, with its two high grated windows, and its Christ carved in old brown oak with His arms extended and His head sorrowfully inclined upon His shoulder, inspired me with I do not know what kind of religious fear that accorded with my actual situation.

All my ideas of false accusation disappeared, and my lips tremblingly murmured a prayer.

I had not prayed for a long time; but misfortune always brings us to thoughts of submission. Man is so little in himself!

Opposite me, on an elevated seat, two men were sitting with their backs to the light, and consequently their faces were in shadow. However, I recognized Van Spreckdal by his aquiline profile, illuminated by an oblique reflection from the window. The other person was fat, he had round, chubby cheeks and short hands, and he wore a robe, like Van Spreckdal.

Below was the clerk of the court, Conrad; he was writing at a low table and was tickling the tip of his ear with the feather-end of his pen. When I entered, he stopped to look at me curiously.

They made me sit down, and Van Spreckdal, raising his voice, said to me:

"Christian Vénius, where did you get this sketch?"

He showed me the nocturnal sketch which was then in his possession. It was handed to me. After having examined it, I replied:

"I am the author of it."

A long silence followed; the clerk of the court, Conrad, wrote down my reply. I heard his pen scratch over the paper, and I thought: "Why did they ask me that question? That has nothing to do with the kick I gave Rap in the back."

"You are the author of it?" asked Van Spreckdal. "What is the subject?"

"It is a subject of pure fancy."

"You have not copied the details from some spot?"

"No, sir; I imagined it all."

"Accused Christian," said the judge in a severe tone, "I ask you to reflect. Do not lie."

"I have spoken the truth."

"Write that down, clerk," said Van Spreckdal.

The pen scratched again.

"And this woman," continued the judge--"this woman who is being murdered at the side of the well--did you imagine her also?"

"Certainly."

"You have never seen her?"

"Never."

Van Spreckdal rose indignantly; then, sitting down again, he seemed to consult his companion in a low voice.

These two dark profiles silhouetted against the brightness of the window, and the three men standing behind me, the silence in the hall--everything made me shiver.

"What do you want with me? What have I done?" I murmured.

Suddenly Van Spreckdal said to my guardians:

"You can take the prisoner back to the carriage; we will go to Metzerstrasse."

Then, addressing me:

"Christian Vénius," he cried, "you are in a deplorable situation. Collect your thoughts and remember that if the law of man is inflexible, there still remains for you the mercy of God. This you can merit by confessing your crime."

These words stunned me like a blow from a hammer. I fell back with extended arms, crying:

"Ah! what a terrible dream!"

And I fainted.

When I regained consciousness, the carriage was rolling slowly down the

street; another one preceded us. The two officers were always with me. One of them on the way offered a pinch of snuff to his companion; mechanically I reached out my hand toward the snuff-box, but he withdrew it quickly.

My cheeks reddened with shame, and I turned away my head to conceal my emotion.

"If you look outside," said the man with the snuff-box, "we shall be obliged to put handcuffs on you."

"May the devil strangle you, you infernal scoundrel!" I said to myself. And as the carriage now stopped, one of them got out, while the other held me by the collar; then, seeing that his comrade was ready to receive me, he pushed me rudely to him.

These infinite precautions to hold possession of my person boded no good; but I was far from predicting the seriousness of the accusation that hung over my head until an alarming circumstance opened my eyes and threw me into despair.

They pushed me along a low alley, the pavement of which was unequal and broken; along the wall there ran a yellowish ooze, exhaling a fetid odour. I walked down this dark place with the two men behind me. A little further there appeared the chiaroscuro of an interior courtyard.

I grew more and more terror-sticken as I advanced. It was no natural feeling: it was a poignant anxiety, outside of nature--like a nightmare. I recoiled instinctively at each step.

"Go on!" cried one of the policemen, laying his hand on my shoulder; "go on!"

But what was my astonishment when, at the end of the passage, I saw the courtyard that I had drawn the night before, with its walls furnished with hooks, its rubbish-heap of old iron, its chicken-coops, and its rabbit-hutch. Not a dormer window, high or low, not a broken pane, not the slightest detail had been omitted.

I was thunderstruck by this strange revelation.

Near the well were the two judges, Van Spreckdal and Richter. At their feet lay the old woman extended on her back, her long, thin, grey hair, her blue face, her eyes wide open, and her tongue between her teeth.

It was a horrible spectacle!

"Well," said Van Spreckdal, with solemn accents, "what have you to say?"

I did not reply.

"Do you remember having thrown this woman, Theresa Becker, into this well, after having strangled her to rob her of her money?"

"No," I cried, "no! I do not know this woman; I never saw her before. May God help me!"

"That will do," he replied in a dry voice. And without saying another word he went out with his companion.

The officers now believed that they had best put handcuffs on me. They took me back to the Raspelhaus, in a state of profound stupidity. I did not know what to think; my conscience itself troubled me; I even asked myself if I really had murdered the old woman!

In the eyes of the officers I was condemned.

I will not tell you of my emotions that night in the Raspelhaus, when, seated on my straw bed with the window opposite me and the gallows in perspective, I heard the watchmen cry in the silence of the night: "Sleep, people of Nuremberg; the Lord watches over you. One o'clock! Two o'clock! Three o'clock!"

Every one may form his own idea of such a night. There is a fine saying that it is better to be hanged innocent than guilty. For the soul, yes; but for the body, it makes no difference; on the contrary, it kicks, it curses its lot, it tries to escape, knowing well enough that its role ends with the rope. Add to this, that it repents not having sufficiently enjoyed life and at having listened to the soul when it preached abstinence.

"Ah! if I had only known!" it cried, "you would not have led me around by a string with your big words, your beautiful phrases, and your magnificent sentences! You would not have allured me with your fine promises. I should have had many happy moments that are now lost forever. Everything is over! You said to me: 'Control your passions.' Very well! I did control them. Here I am now. They are going to hang me, and you--later they will speak of you as a sublime soul, a stoical soul, a martyr to the errors of Justice. They will never think about me!"

Such were the sad reflections of my poor body.

Day broke; at first, dull and undecided, it threw an uncertain light on my bull's-eye window with its cross-bars; then it blazed against the wall at the back. Outside the street became lively. This was a market-day; it was Friday. I heard the vegetable wagons pass and also the country people with their baskets. Some chickens cackled in their coops in passing and some butter sellers chattered together. The market

opposite opened, and they began to arrange the stalls.

Finally it was broad daylight and the vast murmur of the increasing crowd, housekeepers who assembled with baskets on their arms, coming and going, discussing and marketing, told me that it was eight o'clock.

With the light, my heart gained a little courage. Some of my black thoughts disappeared. I desired to see what was going on outside.

Other prisoners before me had managed to climb up to the bull's-eye; they had dug some holes in the wall to mount more easily. I climbed in my turn, and, when seated in the oval edge of the window, with my legs bent and my head bowed, I could see the crowd, and all the life and movement. Tears ran freely down my cheeks. I thought no longer of suicide--I experienced a need to live and breathe, which was really extraordinary.

"Ah!" I said, "to live what happiness! Let them harness me to a wheelbarrow--let them put a ball and chain around my leg--nothing matters if I may only live!"

The old market, with its roof shaped like an extinguisher, supported on heavy pillars, made a superb picture: old women seated before their panniers of vegetables, their cages of poultry and their baskets of eggs; behind them the Jews, dealers in old clothes, their faces the colour of old box-wood; butchers with bare arms, cutting up meat on their stalls; countrymen, with large hats on the backs of their heads, calm and grave with their hands behind their backs and resting on their sticks of hollywood, and tranquilly smoking their pipes. Then the tumult and noise of the crowd--those screaming, shrill, grave, high, and short words--those expressive gestures--those sudden attitudes that show from a distance the progress of a discussion and depict so well the character of the individual--in short, all this captivated my mind, and notwithstanding my sad condition, I felt happy to be still of the world.

Now, while I looked about in this manner, a man--a butcher--passed, inclining forward and carrying an enormous quarter of beef on his shoulders; his arms were bare, his elbows were raised upward and his head was bent under them. His long hair, like that of Salvator's Sicambrian, hid his face from me; and yet, at the first glance, I trembled.

"It is he!" I said.

All the blood in my body rushed to my heart. I got down from the window trembling to the ends of my fingers, feeling my cheeks quiver, and the pallor spread over my face, stammering in a choked voice:

"It is he! he is there--there--and I, I have to die to expiate his

crime. Oh, God! what shall I do? What shall I do?"

A sudden idea, an inspiration from Heaven, flashed across my mind. I put my hand in the pocket of my coat--my box of crayons was there!

Then rushing to the wall, I began to trace the scene of the murder with superhuman energy. No uncertainty, no hesitation! I knew the man! I had seen him! He was there before me!

At ten o'clock the jailer came to my cell. His owl-like impassibility gave place to admiration.

"Is it possible?" he cried, standing at the threshold.

"Go, bring me my judges," I said to him, pursuing my work with an increasing exultation.

Schlüssel answered:

"They are waiting for you in the trial-room."

"I wish to make a revelation," I cried, as I put the finishing touches to the mysterious personage.

He lived; he was frightful to see. His full-faced figure, foreshortened upon the wall, stood out from the white background with an astonishing vitality.

The jailer went away.

A few minutes afterward the two judges appeared. They were stupefied. I, trembling, with extended hand, said to them:

"There is the murderer!"

After a few minutes of silence, Van Spreckdal asked me:

"What is his name?"

"I don't know; but he is at this moment in the market; he is cutting up meat in the third stall to the left as you enter from Trabaus Street."

"What do you think?" said he, leaning toward his colleague.

"Send for the man," he replied in a grave tone.

Several officers retained in the corridor obeyed this order. The judges stood, examining the sketch. As for me, I had dropped on my bed of straw, my head between my knees, perfectly exhausted.

Soon steps were heard echoing under the archway. Those who have never awaited the hour of deliverance and counted the minutes, which seem like centuries--those who have never experienced the sharp emotions of outrage, terror, hope, and doubt--can have no conception of the inward chills that I experienced at that moment. I should have distinguished the step of the murderer, walking between the guards, among a thousand others. They approached. The judges themselves seemed moved. I raised up my head, my heart feeling as if an iron hand had clutched it, and I fixed my eyes upon the closed door. It opened. The man entered. His cheeks were red and swollen, the muscles in his large contracted jaws twitched as far as his ears, and his little restless eyes, yellow like a wolf's, gleamed beneath his heavy yellowish red eyebrows.

Van Spreckdal showed him the sketch in silence.

Then that murderous man, with the large shoulders, having looked, grew pale--then, giving a roar which thrilled us all with terror, he waved his enormous arms, and jumped backward to overthrow the guards. There was a terrible struggle in the corridor; you could hear nothing but the panting breath of the butcher, his muttered imprecations, and the short words and the shuffling feet of the guard, upon the flagstones.

This lasted only about a minute.

Finally the assassin re-entered, with his head hanging down, his eyes bloodshot, and his hands fastened behind his back. He looked again at the picture of the murderer; he seemed to reflect, and then, in a low voice, as if talking to himself:

"Who could have seen me," he said, "at midnight?"

I was saved!

* * * * *

Many years have passed since that terrible adventure. Thank Heaven! I make silhouettes no longer, nor portraits of burgomasters. Through hard work and perseverance, I have conquered my place in the world, and I earn my living honourably by painting works of art--the sole end, in my opinion, to which a true artist should aspire. But the memory of that nocturnal sketch has always remained in my mind. Sometimes, in the midst of work, the thought of it recurs. Then I lay down my palette and dream for hours.

How could a crime committed by a man that I did not know--at a place that I had never seen--have been reproduced by my pencil, in all its smallest details?

Was it chance? No! And moreover, what is chance but the effect of a cause of which we are ignorant?

Was Schiller right when he said: "The immortal soul does not participate in the weaknesses of matter; during the sleep of the body, it spreads its radiant wings and travels, God knows where! What it then does, no one can say, but inspiration sometimes betrays the secret of its nocturnal wanderings."

Who knows? Nature is more audacious in her realities than man in his most fantastic imagining.

From:
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WINTER SLEEP

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Nets to Catch the Wind*, by Elinor Wylie

When against earth a wooden heel
Clicks as loud as stone and steel,
When snow turns flour instead of flakes,
And frost bakes clay as fire bakes,
When the hard-bitten fields at last
Crack like iron flawed in the cast,
When the world is wicked and cross and old,
I long to be quit of the cruel cold.

Little birds like bubbles of glass
Fly to other Americas,
Birds as bright as sparkles of wine
Fly in the night to the Argentine,
Birds of azure and flame-birds go
To the tropical Gulf of Mexico:
They chase the sun, they follow the heat,
It is sweet in their bones, O sweet, sweet, sweet!
It's not with them that I'd love to be,
But under the roots of the balsam tree.

Just as the spiniest chestnut-burr
Is lined within with the finest fur,
So the stony-walled, snow-roofed house
Of every squirrel and mole and mouse
Is lined with thistledown, sea-gull's feather,
Velvet mullein-leaf, heaped together
With balsam and juniper, dry and curled,
Sweeter than anything else in the world.
O what a warm and darksome nest

Where the wildest things are hidden to rest!
It's there that I'd love to lie and sleep,
Soft, soft, soft, and deep, deep, deep!

YOU TOUCHED ME

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *England, My England*, by D.H. Lawrence

The Pottery House was a square, ugly, brick house girt in by the wall that enclosed the whole grounds of the pottery itself. To be sure, a privet hedge partly masked the house and its ground from the pottery-yard and works: but only partly. Through the hedge could be seen the desolate yard, and the many-windowed, factory-like pottery, over the hedge could be seen the chimneys and the outhouses. But inside the hedge, a pleasant garden and lawn sloped down to a willow pool, which had once supplied the works.

The Pottery itself was now closed, the great doors of the yard permanently shut. No more the great crates with yellow straw showing through, stood in stacks by the packing shed. No more the drays drawn by great horses rolled down the hill with a high load. No more the pottery-lasses in their clay-coloured overalls, their faces and hair splashed with grey fine mud, shrieked and larked with the men. All that was over.

'We like it much better--oh, much better--quieter,' said Matilda Rockley.

'Oh, yes,' assented Emmie Rockley, her sister.

'I'm sure you do,' agreed the visitor.

But whether the two Rockley girls really liked it better, or whether they only imagined they did, is a question. Certainly their lives were much more grey and dreary now that the grey clay had ceased to spatter its mud and silt its dust over the premises. They did not quite realize how they missed the shrieking, shouting lasses, whom they had known all their lives and disliked so much.

Matilda and Emmie were already old maids. In a thorough industrial district, it is not easy for the girls who have expectations above the common to find husbands. The ugly industrial town was full of men, young men who were ready to marry. But they were all colliers or pottery-hands, mere workmen. The Rockley girls would have about ten thousand pounds each when their father died: ten thousand pounds' worth of profitable house-property. It was not to be sneezed at: they felt so themselves, and

refrained from sneezing away such a fortune on any mere member of the proletariat. Consequently, bank-clerks or nonconformist clergymen or even school-teachers having failed to come forward, Matilda had begun to give up all idea of ever leaving the Pottery House.

Matilda was a tall, thin, graceful fair girl, with a rather large nose. She was the Mary to Emmie's Martha: that is, Matilda loved painting and music, and read a good many novels, whilst Emmie looked after the house-keeping. Emmie was shorter, plumper than her sister, and she had no accomplishments. She looked up to Matilda, whose mind was naturally refined and sensible.

In their quiet, melancholy way, the two girls were happy. Their mother was dead. Their father was ill also. He was an intelligent man who had had some education, but preferred to remain as if he were one with the rest of the working people. He had a passion for music and played the violin pretty well. But now he was getting old, he was very ill, dying of a kidney disease. He had been rather a heavy whisky-drinker.

This quiet household, with one servant-maid, lived on year after year in the Pottery House. Friends came in, the girls went out, the father drank himself more and more ill. Outside in the street there was a continual racket of the colliers and their dogs and children. But inside the pottery wall was a deserted quiet.

In all this ointment there was one little fly. Ted Rockley, the father of the girls, had had four daughters, and no son. As his girls grew, he felt angry at finding himself always in a house-hold of women. He went off to London and adopted a boy out of a Charity Institution. Emmie was fourteen years old, and Matilda sixteen, when their father arrived home with his prodigy, the boy of six, Hadrian.

Hadrian was just an ordinary boy from a Charity Home, with ordinary brownish hair and ordinary bluish eyes and of ordinary rather cockney speech. The Rockley girls--there were three at home at the time of his arrival--had resented his being sprung on them. He, with his watchful, charity-institution instinct, knew this at once. Though he was only six years old, Hadrian had a subtle, jeering look on his face when he regarded the three young women. They insisted he should address them as Cousin: Cousin Flora, Cousin Matilda, Cousin Emmie. He complied, but there seemed a mockery in his tone.

The girls, however, were kind-hearted by nature. Flora married and left home. Hadrian did very much as he pleased with Matilda and Emmie, though they had certain strictnesses. He grew up in the Pottery House and about the Pottery premises, went to an elementary school, and was invariably called Hadrian Rockley. He regarded Cousin Matilda and Cousin Emmie with a certain laconic indifference, was quiet and reticent in his ways. The girls called him sly, but that was unjust. He was merely cautious, and

without frankness. His Uncle, Ted Rockley, understood him tacitly, their natures were somewhat akin. Hadrian and the elderly man had a real but unemotional regard for one another.

When he was thirteen years old the boy was sent to a High School in the County town. He did not like it. His Cousin Matilda had longed to make a little gentleman of him, but he refused to be made. He would give a little contemptuous curve to his lip, and take on a shy, charity-boy grin, when refinement was thrust upon him. He played truant from the High School, sold his books, his cap with its badge, even his very scarf and pocket-handkerchief, to his school-fellows, and went raking off heaven knows where with the money. So he spent two very unsatisfactory years.

When he was fifteen he announced that he wanted to leave England and go to the Colonies. He had kept touch with the Home. The Rockleys knew that, when Hadrian made a declaration, in his quiet, half-jeering manner, it was worse than useless to oppose him. So at last the boy departed, going to Canada under the protection of the Institution to which he had belonged. He said good-bye to the Rockleys without a word of thanks, and parted, it seemed, without a pang. Matilda and Emmie wept often to think of how he left them: even on their father's face a queer look came. But Hadrian wrote fairly regularly from Canada. He had entered some electricity works near Montreal, and was doing well.

At last, however, the war came. In his turn, Hadrian joined up and came to Europe. The Rockleys saw nothing of him. They lived on, just the same, in the Pottery House. Ted Rockley was dying of a sort of dropsy, and in his heart he wanted to see the boy. When the armistice was signed, Hadrian had a long leave, and wrote that he was coming home to the Pottery House.

The girls were terribly fluttered. To tell the truth, they were a little afraid of Hadrian. Matilda, tall and thin, was frail in her health, both girls were worn with nursing their father. To have Hadrian, a young man of twenty-one, in the house with them, after he had left them so coldly five years before, was a trying circumstance.

They were in a flutter. Emmie persuaded her father to have his bed made finally in the morning-room downstairs, whilst his room upstairs was prepared for Hadrian. This was done, and preparations were going on for the arrival, when, at ten o'clock in the morning the young man suddenly turned up, quite unexpectedly. Cousin Emmie, with her hair bobbed up in absurd little bobs round her forehead, was busily polishing the stair-rods, while Cousin Matilda was in the kitchen washing the drawing-room ornaments in a lather, her sleeves rolled back on her thin arms, and her head tied up oddly and coquettishly in a duster.

Cousin Matilda blushed deep with mortification when the self-possessed young man walked in with his kit-bag, and put his cap on the sewing

machine. He was little and self-confident, with a curious neatness about him that still suggested the Charity Institution. His face was brown, he had a small moustache, he was vigorous enough in his smallness.

'_Well_, is it Hadrian!' exclaimed Cousin Matilda, wringing the lather off her hand. 'We didn't expect you till tomorrow.'

'I got off Monday night,' said Hadrian, glancing round the room.

'Fancy!' said Cousin Matilda. Then, having dried her hands, she went forward, held out her hand, and said:

'How are you?'

'Quite well, thank you,' said Hadrian.

'You're quite a man,' said Cousin Matilda.

Hadrian glanced at her. She did not look her best: so thin, so large-nosed, with that pink-and-white checked duster tied round her head. She felt her disadvantage. But she had had a good deal of suffering and sorrow, she did not mind any more.

The servant entered--one that did not know Hadrian.

'Come and see my father,' said Cousin Matilda.

In the hall they roused Cousin Emmie like a partridge from cover. She was on the stairs pushing the bright stair-rods into place. Instinctively her hand went to the little knobs, her front hair bobbed on her forehead.

'Why!' she exclaimed, crossly. 'What have you come today for?'

'I got off a day earlier,' said Hadrian, and his man's voice so deep and unexpected was like a blow to Cousin Emmie.

'Well, you've caught us in the midst of it,' she said, with resentment. Then all three went into the middle room.

Mr. Rockley was dressed--that is, he had on his trousers and socks--but he was resting on the bed, propped up just under the window, from whence he could see his beloved and resplendent garden, where tulips and apple-trees were ablaze. He did not look as ill as he was, for the water puffed him up, and his face kept its colour. His stomach was much swollen. He glanced round swiftly, turning his eyes without turning his head. He was the wreck of a handsome, well-built man.

Seeing Hadrian, a queer, unwilling smile went over his face. The young man greeted him sheepishly.

'You wouldn't make a life-guardsman,' he said. 'Do you want something to eat?'

Hadrian looked round--as if for the meal.

'I don't mind,' he said.

'What shall you have--egg and bacon?' asked Emmie shortly.

'Yes, I don't mind,' said Hadrian.

The sisters went down to the kitchen, and sent the servant to finish the stairs.

'Isn't he _altered_?' said Matilda, _sotto voce_.

'Isn't he!' said Cousin Emmie. '_What_ a little man!'

They both made a grimace, and laughed nervously.

'Get the frying-pan,' said Emmie to Matilda.

'But he's as cocky as ever,' said Matilda, narrowing her eyes and shaking her head knowingly, as she handed the frying-pan.

'Mannie!' said Emmie sarcastically. Hadrian's new-fledged, cock-sure manliness evidently found no favour in her eyes.

'Oh, he's not bad,' said Matilda. 'You don't want to be prejudiced against him.'

I'm not prejudiced against him, I think he's all right for looks,' said Emmie, 'but there's too much of the little mannie about him.'

'Fancy catching us like this,' said Matilda.

'They've no thought for anything,' said Emmie with contempt. 'You go up and get dressed, our Matilda. I don't care about him. I can see to things, and you can talk to him. I shan't.'

'He'll talk to my father,' said Matilda, meaningful.

'_Sly--!_' exclaimed Emmie, with a grimace.

The sisters believed that Hadrian had come hoping to get something out of their father--hoping for a legacy. And they were not at all sure he would not get it.

Matilda went upstairs to change. She had thought it all out how she would receive Hadrian, and impress him. And he had caught her with her head tied up in a duster, and her thin arms in a basin of lather. But she did not care. She now dressed herself most scrupulously, carefully folded her long, beautiful, blonde hair, touched her pallor with a little rouge, and put her long string of exquisite crystal beads over her soft green dress. Now she looked elegant, like a heroine in a magazine illustration, and almost as unreal.

She found Hadrian and her father talking away. The young man was short of speech as a rule, but he could find his tongue with his 'uncle'. They were both sipping a glass of brandy, and smoking, and chatting like a pair of old cronies. Hadrian was telling about Canada. He was going back there when his leave was up.

'You wouldn't like to stop in England, then?' said Mr. Rockley.

'No, I wouldn't stop in England,' said Hadrian.

'How's that? There's plenty of electricians here,' said Mr. Rockley.

'Yes. But there's too much difference between the men and the employers over here--too much of that for me,' said Hadrian.

The sick man looked at him narrowly, with oddly smiling eyes.

'That's it, is it?' he replied.

Matilda heard and understood. 'So that's your big idea, is it, my little man,' she said to herself. She had always said of Hadrian that he had no proper _respect_ for anybody or anything, that he was sly and _common_. She went down to the kitchen for a _sotto voce_ confab with Emmie.

'He thinks a rare lot of himself!' she whispered.

'He's somebody, he is!' said Emmie with contempt.

'He thinks there's too much difference between masters and men, over here,' said Matilda.

'Is it any different in Canada?' asked Emmie.

'Oh, yes--democratic,' replied Matilda, 'He thinks they're all on a level over there.'

'Ay, well he's over here now,' said Emmie dryly, 'so he can keep his place.'

As they talked they saw the young man sauntering down the garden, looking

casually at the flowers. He had his hands in his pockets, and his soldier's cap neatly on his head. He looked quite at his ease, as if in possession. The two women, fluttered, watched him through the window.

'We know what he's come for,' said Emmie, churlishly. Matilda looked a long time at the neat khaki figure. It had something of the charity-boy about it still; but now it was a man's figure, laconic, charged with plebeian energy. She thought of the derisive passion in his voice as he had declaimed against the propertied classes, to her father.

'You don't know, Emmie. Perhaps he's not come for that,' she rebuked her sister. They were both thinking of the money.

They were still watching the young soldier. He stood away at the bottom of the garden, with his back to them, his hands in his pockets, looking into the water of the willow pond. Matilda's dark-blue eyes had a strange, full look in them, the lids, with the faint blue veins showing, dropped rather low. She carried her head light and high, but she had a look of pain. The young man at the bottom of the garden turned and looked up the path. Perhaps he saw them through the window. Matilda moved into shadow.

That afternoon their father seemed weak and ill. He was easily exhausted. The doctor came, and told Matilda that the sick man might die suddenly at any moment--but then he might not. They must be prepared.

So the day passed, and the next. Hadrian made himself at home. He went about in the morning in his brownish jersey and his khaki trousers, collarless, his bare neck showing. He explored the pottery premises, as if he had some secret purpose in so doing, he talked with Mr. Rockley, when the sick man had strength. The two girls were always angry when the two men sat talking together like cronies. Yet it was chiefly a kind of politics they talked.

On the second day after Hadrian's arrival, Matilda sat with her father in the evening. She was drawing a picture which she wanted to copy. It was very still, Hadrian was gone out somewhere, no one knew where, and Emmie was busy. Mr. Rockley reclined on his bed, looking out in silence over his evening-sunny garden.

'If anything happens to me, Matilda,' he said, 'you won't sell this house--you'll stop here--'

Matilda's eyes took their slightly haggard look as she stared at her father.

'Well, we couldn't do anything else,' she said.

'You don't know what you might do,' he said. 'Everything is left to you

and Emmie, equally. You'do as you like with it--only don't sell this house, don't part with it.'

'No,' she said.

'And give Hadrian my watch and chain, and a hundred pounds out of what's in the bank--and help him if he ever wants helping. I haven't put his name in the will.'

'Your watch and chain, and a hundred pounds--yes. But you'll be here when he goes back to Canada, father.'

'You never know what'll happen,' said her father.

Matilda sat and watched him, with her full, haggard eyes, for a long time, as if tranced. She saw that he knew he must go soon--she saw like a clairvoyant.

Later on she told Emmie what her father had said about the watch and chain and the money.

'What right has _he'--he_--meaning Hadrian--'to my father's watch and chain--what has it to do with him? Let him have the money, and get off,' said Emmie. She loved her father.

That night Matilda sat late in her room. Her heart was anxious and breaking, her mind seemed entranced. She was too much entranced even to weep, and all the time she thought of her father, only her father. At last she felt she must go to him.

It was near midnight. She went along the passage and to his room. There was a faint light from the moon outside. She listened at his door. Then she softly opened and entered. The room was faintly dark. She heard a movement on the bed.

'Are you asleep?' she said softly, advancing to the side of the bed.

'Are you asleep?' she repeated gently, as she stood at the side of the bed. And she reached her hand in the darkness to touch his forehead. Delicately, her fingers met the nose and the eyebrows, she laid her fine, delicate hand on his brow. It seemed fresh and smooth--very fresh and smooth. A sort of surprise stirred her, in her entranced state. But it could not waken her. Gently, she leaned over the bed and stirred her fingers over the low-growing hair on his brow.

'Can't you sleep tonight?' she said.

There was a quick stirring in the bed. 'Yes, I can,' a voice answered. It was Hadrian's voice. She started away. Instantly, she was wakened from

her late-at-night trance. She remembered that her father was downstairs, that Hadrian had his room. She stood in the darkness as if stung.

'It is you, Hadrian?' she said. 'I thought it was my father.' She was so startled, so shocked, that she could not move. The young man gave an uncomfortable laugh, and turned in his bed.

At last she got out of the room. When she was back in her own room, in the light, and her door was closed, she stood holding up her hand that had touched him, as if it were hurt. She was almost too shocked, she could not endure.

'Well,' said her calm and weary mind, 'it was only a mistake, why take any notice of it.'

But she could not reason her feelings so easily. She suffered, feeling herself in a false position. Her right hand, which she had laid so gently on his face, on his fresh skin, ached now, as if it were really injured. She could not forgive Hadrian for the mistake: it made her dislike him deeply.

Hadrian too slept badly. He had been awakened by the opening of the door, and had not realized what the question meant. But the soft, straying tenderness of her hand on his face startled something out of his soul. He was a charity boy, aloof and more or less at bay. The fragile exquisiteness of her caress startled him most, revealed unknown things to him.

In the morning she could feel the consciousness in his eyes, when she came downstairs. She tried to bear herself as if nothing at all had happened, and she succeeded. She had the calm self-control, self-indifference, of one who has suffered and borne her suffering. She looked at him from her darkish, almost drugged blue eyes, she met the spark of consciousness in his eyes, and quenched it. And with her long, fine hand she put the sugar in his coffee.

But she could not control him as she thought she could. He had a keen memory stinging his mind, a new set of sensations working in his consciousness. Something new was alert in him. At the back of his reticent, guarded mind he kept his secret alive and vivid. She was at his mercy, for he was unscrupulous, his standard was not her standard.

He looked at her curiously. She was not beautiful, her nose was too large, her chin was too small, her neck was too thin. But her skin was clear and fine, she had a high-bred sensitiveness. This queer, brave, high-bred quality she shared with her father. The charity boy could see it in her tapering fingers, which were white and ringed. The same glamour that he knew in the elderly man he now saw in the woman. And he wanted to possess himself of it, he wanted to make himself master of it. As he went

about through the old pottery-yard, his secretive mind schemed and worked. To be master of that strange soft delicacy such as he had felt in her hand upon his face,--this was what he set himself towards. He was secretly plotting.

He watched Matilda as she went about, and she became aware of his attention, as of some shadow following her. But her pride made her ignore it. When he sauntered near her, his hands in his pockets, she received him with that same commonplace kindliness which mastered him more than any contempt. Her superior breeding seemed to control him. She made herself feel towards him exactly as she had always felt: he was a young boy who lived in the house with them, but was a stranger. Only, she dared not remember his face under her hand. When she remembered that, she was bewildered. Her hand had offended her, she wanted to cut it off. And she wanted, fiercely, to cut off the memory in him. She assumed she had done so.

One day, when he sat talking with his 'uncle', he looked straight into the eyes of the sick man, and said:

'But I shouldn't like to live and die here in Rawsley.'

'No--well--you needn't,' said the sick man.

'Do you think Cousin Matilda likes it?'

'I should think so.'

'I don't call it much of a life,' said the youth. 'How much older is she than me, Uncle?'

The sick man looked at the young soldier.

'A good bit,' he said.

'Over thirty?' said Hadrian.

'Well, not so much. She's thirty-two.'

Hadrian considered a while.

'She doesn't look it,' he said.

Again the sick father looked at him.

'Do you think she'd like to leave here?' said Hadrian.

'Nay, I don't know,' replied the father, restive.

Hadrian sat still, having his own thoughts. Then in a small, quiet voice, as if he were speaking from inside himself, he said:

'I'd marry her if you wanted me to.'

The sick man raised his eyes suddenly, and stared. He stared for a long time. The youth looked inscrutably out of the window.

'_You!_' said the sick man, mocking, with some contempt. Hadrian turned and met his eyes. The two men had an inexplicable understanding.

'If you wasn't against it,' said Hadrian.

'Nay,' said the father, turning aside, 'I don't think I'm against it. I've never thought of it. But--But Emmie's the youngest.'

He had flushed, and looked suddenly more alive. Secretly he loved the boy.

'You might ask her,' said Hadrian.

The elder man considered.

'Hadn't you better ask her yourself?' he said.

'She'd take more notice of you,' said Hadrian.

They were both silent. Then Emmie came in.

For two days Mr. Rockley was excited and thoughtful. Hadrian went about quietly, secretly, unquestioning. At last the father and daughter were alone together. It was very early morning, the father had been in much pain. As the pain abated, he lay still, thinking.

'Matilda!' he said suddenly, looking at his daughter.

'Yes, I'm here,' she said.

'Ay! I want you to do something--'

She rose in anticipation.

'Nay, sit still. I want you to marry Hadrian--'

She thought he was raving. She rose, bewildered and frightened.

'Nay, sit you still, sit you still. You hear what I tell you.'

'But you don't know what you're saying, father.'

'Ay, I know well enough. I want you to marry Hadrian, I tell you.'

She was dumbfounded. He was a man of few words.

'You'll do what I tell you,' he said.

She looked at him slowly.

'What put such an idea in your mind?' she said proudly.

'He did.'

Matilda almost looked her father down, her pride was so offended.

'Why, it's disgraceful,' she said.

'Why?'

She watched him slowly.

'What do you ask me for?' she said. 'It's disgusting.'

'The lad's sound enough,' he replied, testily.

'You'd better tell him to clear out,' she said, coldly.

He turned and looked out of the window. She sat flushed and erect for a long time. At length her father turned to her, looking really malevolent.

'If you won't,' he said, 'you're a fool, and I'll make you pay for your foolishness, do you see?'

Suddenly a cold fear gripped her. She could not believe her senses. She was terrified and bewildered. She stared at her father, believing him to be delirious, or mad, or drunk. What could she do?

'I tell you,' he said. 'I'll send for Whittle tomorrow if you don't. You shall neither of you have anything of mine.'

Whittle was the solicitor. She understood her father well enough: he would send for his solicitor, and make a will leaving all his property to Hadrian: neither she nor Emmie should have anything. It was too much. She rose and went out of the room, up to her own room, where she locked herself in.

She did not come out for some hours. At last, late at night, she confided in Emmie.

'The sliving demon, he wants the money,' said Emmie. 'My father's out of his mind.'

The thought that Hadrian merely wanted the money was another blow to Matilda. She did not love the impossible youth--but she had not yet learned to think of him as a thing of evil. He now became hideous to her mind.

Emmie had a little scene with her father next day.

'You don't mean what you said to our Matilda yesterday, do you, father?' she asked aggressively.

'Yes,' he replied.

'What, that you'll alter your will?'

'Yes.'

'You won't,' said his angry daughter.

But he looked at her with a malevolent little smile.

'Annie!' he shouted. 'Annie!'

He had still power to make his voice carry. The servant maid came in from the kitchen.

'Put your things on, and go down to Whittle's office, and say I want to see Mr. Whittle as soon as he can, and will he bring a will-form.'

The sick man lay back a little--he could not lie down. His daughter sat as if she had been struck. Then she left the room.

Hadrian was pottering about in the garden. She went straight down to him.

'Here,' she said. 'You'd better get off. You'd better take your things and go from here, quick.'

Hadrian looked slowly at the infuriated girl.

'Who says so?' he asked.

'_We_ say so--get off, you've done enough mischief and damage.'

'Does Uncle say so?'

'Yes, he does.'

'I'll go and ask him.'

But like a fury Emmie barred his way.

'No, you needn't. You needn't ask him nothing at all. We don't want you, so you can go.'

'Uncle's boss here.'

'A man that's dying, and you crawling round and working on him for his money!--you're not fit to live.'

'Oh!' he said. 'Who says I'm working for his money?'

'I say. But my father told our Matilda, and _she_ knows what you are. _She_ knows what you're after. So you might as well clear out, for all you'll get--guttersnipe!'

He turned his back on her, to think. It had not occurred to him that they would think he was after the money. He _did_ want the money--badly. He badly wanted to be an employer himself, not one of the employed. But he knew, in his subtle, calculating way, that it was not for money he wanted Matilda. He wanted both the money and Matilda. But he told himself the two desires were separate, not one. He could not do with Matilda, _without_ the money. But he did not want her _for_ the money.

When he got this clear in his mind, he sought for an opportunity to tell it her, lurking and watching. But she avoided him. In the evening the lawyer came. Mr. Rockley seemed to have a new access of strength--a will was drawn up, making the previous arrangements wholly conditional. The old will held good, if Matilda would consent to marry Hadrian. If she refused then at the end of six months the whole property passed to Hadrian.

Mr. Rockley told this to the young man, with malevolent satisfaction. He seemed to have a strange desire, quite unreasonable, for revenge upon the women who had surrounded him for so long, and served him so carefully.

'Tell her in front of me,' said Hadrian.

So Mr. Rockley sent for his daughters.

At last they came, pale, mute, stubborn. Matilda seemed to have retired far off, Emmie seemed like a fighter ready to fight to the death. The sick man reclined on the bed, his eyes bright, his puffed hand trembling. But his face had again some of its old, bright handsomeness. Hadrian sat quiet, a little aside: the indomitable, dangerous charity boy.

'There's the will,' said their father, pointing them to the paper.

The two women sat mute and immovable, they took no notice.

'Either you marry Hadrian, or he has everything,' said the father with satisfaction.

'Then let him have everything,' said Matilda boldly.

'He's not! He's not!' cried Emmie fiercely. 'He's not going to have it. The guttersnipe!'

An amused look came on her father's face.

'You hear that, Hadrian,' he said.

'I didn't offer to marry Cousin Matilda for the money,' said Hadrian, flushing and moving on his seat.

Matilda looked at him slowly, with her dark-blue, drugged eyes. He seemed a strange little monster to her.

'Why, you liar, you know you did,' cried Emmie.

The sick man laughed. Matilda continued to gaze strangely at the young man.

'She knows I didn't,' said Hadrian.

He too had his courage, as a rat has indomitable courage in the end. Hadrian had some of the neatness, the reserve, the underground quality of the rat. But he had perhaps the ultimate courage, the most unquenchable courage of all.

Emmie looked at her sister.

'Oh, well,' she said. 'Matilda--don't bother. Let him have everything, we can look after ourselves.'

'I know he'll take everything,' said Matilda, abstractedly.

Hadrian did not answer. He knew in fact that if Matilda refused him he would take everything, and go off with it.

'A clever little mannie--!' said Emmie, with a jeering grimace.

The father laughed noiselessly to himself. But he was tired....

'Go on, then,' he said. 'Go on, let me be quiet.'

Emmie turned and looked at him.

'You deserve what you've got,' she said to her father bluntly.

'Go on,' he answered mildly. 'Go on.'

Another night passed--a night nurse sat up with Mr. Rockley. Another day came. Hadrian was there as ever, in his woollen jersey and coarse khaki trousers and bare neck. Matilda went about, frail and distant, Emmie black-browed in spite of her blondness. They were all quiet, for they did not intend the mystified servant to learn anything.

Mr. Rockley had very bad attacks of pain, he could not breathe. The end seemed near. They all went about quiet and stoical, all unyielding. Hadrian pondered within himself. If he did not marry Matilda he would go to Canada with twenty thousand pounds. This was itself a very satisfactory prospect. If Matilda consented he would have nothing--she would have her own money.

Emmie was the one to act. She went off in search of the solicitor and brought him with her. There was an interview, and Whittle tried to frighten the youth into withdrawal--but without avail. The clergyman and relatives were summoned--but Hadrian stared at them and took no notice. It made him angry, however.

He wanted to catch Matilda alone. Many days went by, and he was not successful: she avoided him. At last, lurking, he surprised her one day as she came to pick gooseberries, and he cut off her retreat. He came to the point at once.

'You don't want me, then?' he said, in his subtle, insinuating voice.

'I don't want to speak to you,' she said, averting her face.

'You put your hand on me, though,' he said. 'You shouldn't have done that, and then I should never have thought of it. You shouldn't have touched me.'

'If you were anything decent, you'd know that was a mistake, and forget it,' she said.

'I know it was a mistake--but I shan't forget it. If you wake a man up, he can't go to sleep again because he's told to.'

'If you had any decent feeling in you, you'd have gone away,' she replied.

'I didn't want to,' he replied.

She looked away into the distance. At last she asked:

'What do you persecute me for, if it isn't for the money. I'm old enough to be your mother. In a way I've been your mother.'

'Doesn't matter,' he said. 'You've been no mother to me. Let us marry and go out to Canada--you might as well--you've touched me.'

She was white and trembling. Suddenly she flushed with anger.

'It's so _indecent_,' she said.

'How?' he retorted. 'You touched me.'

But she walked away from him. She felt as if he had trapped her. He was angry and depressed, he felt again despised.

That same evening she went into her father's room.

'Yes,' she said suddenly. 'I'll marry him.'

Her father looked up at her. He was in pain, and very ill.

'You like him now, do you?' he said, with a faint smile.

She looked down into his face, and saw death not far off. She turned and went coldly out of the room.

The solicitor was sent for, preparations were hastily made. In all the interval Matilda did not speak to Hadrian, never answered him if he addressed her. He approached her in the morning.

'You've come round to it, then?' he said, giving her a pleasant look from his twinkling, almost kindly eyes. She looked down at him and turned aside. She looked down on him both literally and figuratively. Still he persisted, and triumphed.

Emmie raved and wept, the secret flew abroad. But Matilda was silent and unmoved, Hadrian was quiet and satisfied, and nipped with fear also. But he held out against his fear. Mr. Rockley was very ill, but unchanged.

On the third day the marriage took place. Matilda and Hadrian drove straight home from the registrar, and went straight into the room of the dying man. His face lit up with a clear twinkling smile.

'Hadrian--you've got her?' he said, a little hoarsely.

'Yes,' said Hadrian, who was pale round the gills.

'Ay, my lad, I'm glad you're mine,' replied the dying man. Then he turned his eyes closely on Matilda.

'Let's look at you, Matilda,' he said. Then his voice went strange and unrecognizable. 'Kiss me,' he said.

She stooped and kissed him. She had never kissed him before, not since she was a tiny child. But she was quiet, very still.

'Kiss him,' the dying man said.

Obediently, Matilda put forward her mouth and kissed the young husband.

'That's right! That's right!' murmured the dying man.

HOW THE LEAVES CAME DOWN.

"How the Leaves Came Down," by Susan Coolidge (1845-), appeals to children because it helps to reconcile them to going to bed. "I go to bed by day" is one of the crosses of childhood.

"I'll tell you how the leaves came down,"
The great Tree to his children said:
"You're getting sleepy, Yellow and Brown,
Yes, very sleepy, little Red.
It is quite time to go to bed."

"Ah!" begged each silly, pouting leaf,
"Let us a little longer stay;
Dear Father Tree, behold our grief!
'Tis such a very pleasant day,
We do not want to go away."

So, for just one more merry day
To the great Tree the leaflets clung,
Frolicked and danced, and had their way,
Upon the autumn breezes swung,
Whispering all their sports among--

"Perhaps the great Tree will forget,
And let us stay until the spring,
If we all beg, and coax, and fret."
But the great Tree did no such thing;
He smiled to hear their whispering.

"Come, children, all to bed," he cried;
And ere the leaves could urge their prayer,

He shook his head, and far and wide,
  Fluttering and rustling everywhere,
  Down sped the leaflets through the air.

I saw them; on the ground they lay,
  Golden and red, a huddled swarm,
Waiting till one from far away,
  White bedclothes heaped upon her arm,
  Should come to wrap them safe and warm.

The great bare Tree looked down and smiled.
 "Good-night, dear little leaves," he said.
And from below each sleepy child
  Replied, "Good-night," and murmured,
 "It is _so_ nice to go to bed!"

SUSAN COOLIDGE.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Poems Every Child Should Know, by Various

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THE STELLAR LEGION

By Leigh Brackett

No one had ever escaped from Venus' dread Stellar Legion. And, as Thekla the low-Martian learned, no one had ever betrayed it and--lived.

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Planet Stories* Winter 1940.
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

Silence was on the barracks like a lid clamped over tight-coiled springs. Men in rumpled uniforms--outlanders of the Stellar Legion, space-rats, the scrapings of the Solar System--sweated in the sullen heat of the Venusian swamplands before the rains. Sweated and listened.

The metal door clanged open to admit Lehn, the young Venusian Commandant, and every man jerked tautly to his feet. Ian MacIan, the white-haired, space-burned Earthman, alone and hungrily poised for action; Thekla, the swart Martian low-canaler, grinning like a weasel beside Bhak, the hulking strangler from Titan. Every quick nervous glance was riveted on Lehn.

The young officer stood silent in the open door, tugging at his fair mustache; to MacIan, watching, he was a trim, clean incongruity in this brutal wilderness of savagery and iron men. Behind him, the eternal mists writhed in a thin curtain over the swamp, stretching for miles beyond the soggy earthworks; through it came the sound every ear had listened to for days, a low, monotonous piping that seemed to ring from the ends of the earth. The Nahali, the six-foot, scarlet-eyed swamp-dwellers, whose touch was weapon enough, praying to their gods for rain. When it came, the hot, torrential downpour of southern Venus, the Nahali would burst in a scaly tide over the fort.

Only a moat of charged water and four electro-cannons stood between the Legion and the horde. If those things failed, it meant two hundred lives burned out, the circle of protective forts broken, the fertile uplands plundered and laid waste. MacIan looked at Lehn's clean, university-bred young face, and wondered cynically if he was strong enough to do his job.

Lehn spoke, so abruptly that the men started. "I'm calling for volunteers. A reconnaissance in Nahali territory; you know well enough what that means. Three men. Well?"

Ian MacIan stepped forward, followed instantly by the Martian Thekla. Bhak the Titan hesitated, his queerly bright, blank eyes darting from Thekla to Lehn, and back to MacIan. Then he stepped up, his hairy face twisted in a sly grin.

Lehn eyed them, his mouth hard with distaste under his fair mustache. Then he nodded, and said; "Report in an hour, light equipment." Turning to go, he added almost as an afterthought, "Report to my quarters, MacIan. Immediately."

MacIan's bony Celtic face tightened and his blue eyes narrowed with wary distrust. But he followed Lehn, his gaunt, powerful body as ramrod-straight as the Venusian's own, and no eye that watched him go held any friendship.

Thekla laughed silently, like a cat with his pointed white teeth. "Two of a kind," he whispered. "I hope they choke each other!" Bhak grunted, flexing his mighty six-fingered hands.

In his quarters, Lehn, his pink face flushed, strode up and down while MacIan waited dourly. It was plain enough what was coming; MacIan felt the old bitter defensive anger rising in him.

"Look," he told himself inwardly. "Books. Good cigars. A girl's picture on the table. You had all that once, you damn fool. Why couldn't you...."

Lehn stopped abruptly in front of him, grey eyes steady. "I'm new here, MacIan," he said. "But we've been Legion men for five generations, and I know the law; no man is to be questioned about his past. I'm going to break the law. Why are you here, MacIan?"

MacIan's white head was gaunt and stubborn as Tantallon Rock, and he kept silent.

"I'm trying to help," Lehn went on, "You've been an officer; every man in the barracks knows that. If you're here for any reason but failure in duty, you can be an officer again. I'll relieve you of special duty; you can start working for the examinations. No need to waste you in the ranks. Well?"

MacIan's eyes were hidden, but his voice was harsh. "What's behind this, Lehn? What the hell is it to you?"

The Venusian's level gaze wavered; for a moment the boy looked through the man, and MacIan felt a quick stab in his heart. Then all that was gone, and Lehn said curtly.

"If you find the barracks congenial stay there, by all means. Dismissed!"

MacIan glared at him half-blindly for a moment, his fine long hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. Then he 'bout faced with vicious smartness and went out.

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Nearly an hour later he stood with the Martian Thekla on the earthworks, waiting. The monotonous pipes prayed on in the swamp; MacIan, looking up at the heavy sky, prayed just as hard that it would not rain. Not just yet. Because if it rained before the patrol left, the patrol would not leave; the Nahali would be on the march with the very first drop.

"And my chance would be gone," he whispered to himself.

Thekla's bright black eyes studied him, as they always did; an insolent, mocking scrutiny that angered the Scot.

"Well," he said dryly. "The perfect soldier, the gallant volunteer. For love of Venus, Thekla, or love of the Legion?"

"Perhaps," said Thekla softly, "for the same reason you did, Earthman. And perhaps not." His face, the swart, hard face of a low-canal outlaw, was turned abruptly toward the mist-wrapped swamp. "Love of Venus!" he

snarled. "Who could love this lousy sweatbox? Not even Lehn, if he had the brains of a flea!"

"Mars is better, eh?" MacIan had a sudden inspiration. "Cool dry air, and little dark women, and the wine-shops on the Jekkara Low-canal. You'd like to be back there, wouldn't you?"

To himself, he thought in savage pleasure, "I'll pay you out, you little scum. You've tortured me with what I've lost, until I'd have killed you if it hadn't been against my plan. All right, see if you can take it!"

The slow dusk was falling; Thekla's dark face was a blur but MacIan knew he had got home. "The fountains in the palace gardens, Thekla; the sun bursting up over red deserts; the singing girls and the _thil_ in Madame Kan's. Remember the _thil_, Thekla? Ice cold and greenish, bubbling in blue glasses?"

He knew why Thekla snarled and sprang at him, and it wasn't Thekla he threw down on the soft earth so much as a tall youngster with a fair mustache, who had goaded with good intent. Funny, thought MacIan, that well-intentioned goads hurt worse than the other kind.

A vast paw closed on his shoulder, hauling him back. Another, he saw, yanked Thekla upright. And Bhak the Titan's hairy travesty of a face peered down at them.

"Listen," he grunted, in his oddly articulated Esperanto. "I know what's up. I got ears, and village houses got thin walls. I heard the Nahali girl talking. I don't know which one of you has the treasure, but I want it. If I don't get it...."

His fingers slid higher on MacIan's shoulder, gripped his throat. Six fingers, like iron clamps. MacIan heard Thekla choking and cursing; he managed to gasp:

"You're in the wrong place, Bhak. We're men. I though you only strangled women."

The grip slackened a trifle. "Men too," said Bhak slowly. "That's why I had to run away from Titan. That's why I've had to run away from everywhere. Men or women--anyone who laughs at me."

MacIan looked at the blank-eyed, revolting face, and wondered that anyone could laugh at it. Pity it, shut it harmlessly away, but not laugh.

Bhak's fingers fell away abruptly. "They laugh at me," he repeated miserably, "and run away. I know I'm ugly. But I want friends and a

wife, like anyone else. Especially a wife. But they laugh at me, the women do, when I ask them. And...." He was shaking suddenly with rage and his face was a beast's face, blind and brutal. "And I kill them. I kill the damned little vixens that laugh at me!"

He stared stupidly at his great hands. "Then I have to run away. Always running away, alone." The bright, empty eyes met MacIan's with deadly purpose. "That's why I want the money. If I have money, they'll like me. Women always like men who have money. If I kill one of you, I'll have to run away again. But if I have someone to go with me. I won't mind."

Thekla showed his pointed teeth. "Try strangling a Nahali girl, Bhak. Then we'll be rid of you."

Bhak grunted. "I'm not a fool. I know what the Nahali do to you. But I want that money the girl told about, and I'll get it. I'd get it now, only Lehn will come."

He stood over them, grinning. MacIan drew back, between pity and disgust. "The Legion is certainly the System's garbage dump," he muttered in Martian, loud enough for Thekla to hear, and smiled at the low-canaler's stifled taunt. Stifled, because Lehn was coming up, his heavy water-boots thudding on the soggy ground.

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Without a word the three fell in behind the officer, whose face had taken on an unfamiliar stony grimness. MacIan wondered whether it was anger at him, or fear of what they might get in the swamp. Then he shrugged; the young cub would have to follow his own trail, wherever it led. And MacIan took a stern comfort from this thought. His own feet were irrevocably directed; there was no doubt, no turning back. He'd never have again to go through what Lehn was going through. All he had to do was wait.

The plank bridge groaned under them, almost touching the water in the moat. Most ingenious, that moat. The Nahali could swim it in their sleep, normally, but when the conductor rods along the bottom were turned on, they literally burned out their circuits from an overload. The swamp-rats packed a bigger potential than any Earthly electric eel.

Ian MacIan, looking at the lights of the squalid village that lay below the fort, reflected that the Nahali had at least one definitely human trait. The banging of a three-tiered Venusian piano echoed on the heavy air, along with shouts and laughter that indicated a free flow of "swamp juice." This link in the chain of stations surrounding the swamplands was fully garrisoned only during the rains, and the less warlike Nahali were busy harvesting what they could from the soldiers

and the rabble that came after them.

Queer creatures, the swamp-rats, with their ruby eyes and iridescent scales. Nature, in adapting them to their wet, humid environment, had left them somewhere between warm-blooded mammals and cold-blooded reptiles, anthropoid in shape, man-sized, capricious. The most remarkable thing about them was their breathing apparatus, each epithelial cell forming a tiny electrolysis plant to extract oxygen from water. Since they lived equally on land and in water, and since the swamp air was almost a mist, it suited them admirably. That was why they had to wait for the rains to go raiding in the fertile uplands; and that was why hundreds of Interworld Legionnaires had to swelter on the strip of soggy ground between swamp and plateau to stop them.

MacIan was last in line. Just as his foot left the planks, four heads jerked up as one, facing to the darkening sky.

"Rain!"

Big drops, splattering slowly down, making a sibilant whisper across the swamp. The pipes broke off, leaving the ears a little deafened with the lack of them after so long. And MacIan, looking at Lehn, swore furiously in his heart.

The three men paused, expecting an order to turn back, but Lehn waved them on.

"But it's raining," protested Bhak. "Well get caught in the attack."

The officer's strangely hard face was turned toward them. "No," he said, with an odd finality, "they won't attack. Not yet."

They went on, toward the swamp that was worse in silence than it had been with the praying pipes. And MacIan, looking ahead at the oddly assorted men plowing grimly through the mud, caught a sudden glimpse of something dark and hidden, something beyond the simple threat of death that hung always over a reconnoitering patrol.

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The swamp folded them in. It is never truly dark on Venus, owing to the thick, diffusing atmosphere. There was enough light to show branching, muddy trails, great still pools choked with weeds, the spreading _liha_-trees with their huge pollen pods, everything dripping with the slow rain. MacIan could hear the thudding of that rain for miles around on the silent air; the sullen forerunner of the deluge.

Fort and village were lost in sodden twilight. Lehn's boots squelched onward through the mud of a trail that rose gradually to a ridge of

higher ground. When he reached the top, Lehn turned abruptly, his electro-gun seeming to materialize in his hand, and MacIan was startled by the bleak look of his pink, young face.

"Stop right there," said Lehn quietly. "Keep your hands up. And don't speak until I'm finished."

He waited a second, with the rain drumming on his waterproof coverall, dripping from the ends of his fair mustache. The others were obedient, Bhak a great grinning hulk between the two slighter men. Lehn went on calmly.

"Someone has sold us out to the Nahali. That's how I know they won't attack until they get the help they're waiting for. I had to find out, if possible, what preparations they have made for destroying our electrical supply, which is our only vulnerable point. But I had a double purpose in calling this party. Can you guess what it is?"

MacIan could. Lehn continued:

"The traitor had his price; escape from the Legion, from Venus, through the swamp to Lhiva, where he can ship out on a tramp. His one problem was to get away from the fort without being seen, since all leaves have been temporarily cancelled."

Lehn's mist-grey eyes were icy. "I gave him that chance."

Bhak laughed, an empty, jarring road. "See? That's what the Nahali girl said. She said, 'He can get what he needs, now. He'll get away before the rains, probably with a patrol; then our people can attack.' I know what he needed. Money! And I want it."

"Shut up!" Lehn's electro-gun gestured peremptorily. "I want the truth of this. Which one of you is the traitor?"

Thekla's pointed white teeth gleamed. "MacIan loves the Legion, sir. _He_ couldn't be guilty."

Lehn's gaze crossed MacIan's briefly, and again the Scot had a fleeting glimpse of something softer beneath the new hardness. It was something that took him back across time to a day when he had been a green subaltern in the Terran Guards, and a hard-bitten, battle-tempered senior officer had filled the horizon for him.

It was the something that had made Lehn offer him a chance, when his trap was set and sprung. It was the something that was going to make Lehn harder on him now than on either Bhak or Thekla. It was hero-worship.

MacIan groaned inwardly. "Look here," he said. "We're in Nahali country. There may be trouble at any moment. Do you think this is the time for detective work? You may have caught the wrong men anyway. Better do your job of reconnoitering, and worry about the identity of the traitor back in the fort."

"You're not an officer now, MacIan!" snapped Lehn. "Speak up, and I want the truth. You, Thekla!"

Thekla's black eyes were bitter. "I'd as well be here as anywhere, since I can't be on Mars. How could I go back, with a hanging charge against me?"

"MacIan?" Lehn's grey gaze was levelled stiffly past his head. And MacIan was quivering suddenly with rage; rage against the life that had brought him where he was, against Lehn, who was the symbol of all he had thrown away.

"Think what you like," he whispered, "and be damned!"

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Bhak's movement came so swiftly that it caught everyone unprepared. Handling the Martian like a child's beanbag, he picked him up and hurled him against Lehn. The electro-gun spat a harmless bolt into empty air as the two fell struggling in the mud. MacIan sprang forward, but Bhak's great fingers closed on his neck. With his free hand, the Titan dragged Thekla upright; he held them both helpless while he kicked the sprawling Lehn in the temple.

In the split second before unconsciousness took him, Lehn's eyes met MacIan's and they were terrible eyes. MacIan groaned, "You young fool!" Then Lehn was down, and Bhak's fingers were throttling him.

"Which one?" snarled the Titan. "Give me the money, and I'll let you go. I'm going to have the money, if I have to kill you. Then the girls won't laugh at me. Tell me. Which one?"

MacIan's blue eyes widened suddenly. With all his strength he fought to croak out one word: "Nahali!"

Bhak dropped them with a grunt. Swinging his great hands, forgetting his gun completely, he stood at bay. There was a rush of bodies in the rain-blurred dusk, a flash of scarlet eyes and triangular mouths laughing in queer, noseless faces. Then there were scaly, man-like things hurled like battering-rams against the Legionnaires.

MacIan's gun spat blue flame; two Nahali fell, electrocuted, but there were too many of them. His helmet was torn off, so that his drenched

white hair blinded him; rubber-shod fists and feet lashed against reptilian flesh. Somewhere just out of sight, Thekla was cursing breathlessly in low-canal argot. And Lehn, still dazed, was crawling gamely to his feet; his helmet had protected him from the full force of Bhak's kick.

The hulking Titan loomed in the midst of a swarm of red-eyed swamp-rats. And MacIan saw abruptly that he had taken off his clumsy gloves when he had made ready to strangle his mates. The great six-fingered hands stretched hungrily toward a Nahali throat.

"Bhak!" yelled MacIan. "_Don't_...!"

The Titan's heavy laughter drowned him out; the vast paws closed in a joyous grip. On the instant, Bhak's great body bent and jerked convulsively; he slumped down, the heart burned out of him by the electricity circuited through his hands.

Lehn's gun spoke. There was a reek of ozone, and a Nahali screamed like a stricken reptile. The Venusian cried out in sudden pain, and was silent; MacIan, struggling upright, saw him buried under a pile of scaly bodies. Then a clammy paw touched his own face. He moaned as a numbing shock struck through him, and lapsed into semi-consciousness.

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He had vague memories of being alternately carried and towed through warm lakes and across solid ground. He knew dimly that he was dumped roughly under a _liha_-tree in a clearing where there were thatched huts, and that he was alone.

After what seemed a very long time he sat up, and his surroundings were clear. Even more clear was Thekla's thin dark face peering amusedly down at him.

The Martian bared his pointed white teeth, and said, "Hello, traitor."

MacIan would have risen and struck him, only that he was weak and dizzy. And then he saw that Thekla had a gun.

His own holster was empty. MacIan got slowly to his feet, raking the white hair out of his eyes, and he said, "You dirty little rat!"

Thekla laughed, as a fox might laugh at a baffled hound. "Go ahead and curse me, MacIan. You high-and-mighty renegade! You were right; I'd rather swing on Mars than live another month in this damned sweatbox! And I can laugh at you, Ian MacIan! I'm going back to the deserts and the wine-shops on the Jekkara Low-canal. The Nahali girl didn't mean money; she meant plastic surgery, to give me another face. I'm free.

And you're going to die, right here in the filthy mud!"

A slow, grim smile touched MacIan's face, but he said nothing.

"Oh, I understand," said Thekla mockingly. "You fallen swells and your honor! But you won't die honorably, any more than you've lived that way."

MacIan's eyes were contemptuous and untroubled.

The pointed teeth gleamed. "You don't understand, MacIan. Lehn isn't going to die. He's going back to face the music, after his post is wiped out. I don't know what they'll do to him, but it won't be nice. And remember, MacIan, he thinks you sold him out. He thinks _you_ cost him his post, his men, his career: his honor, you scut! Think that over when the swamp-rats go to work on you--they like a little fun now and then--and remember I'm laughing!"

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MacIan was silent for a long time, hands clenched at his sides, his craggy face carved in dark stone under his dripping white hair. Then he whispered, "Why?"

Thekla's eyes met his in sudden intense hate. "Because I want to see your damned proud, supercilious noses rubbed in the dirt!"

MacIan nodded. His face was strange, as though a curtain had been drawn over it. "Where's Lehn?"

Thekla pointed to the nearest hut. "But it won't do you any good. The rats gave him an overdose, accidentally, of course, and he's out for a long time."

MacIan went unsteadily toward the hut through rain. Over his shoulder he heard Thekla's voice: "Don't try anything funny, MacIan. I can shoot you down before you're anywhere near an escape, even if you could find your way back without me. The Nahali are gathering now, all over the swamp; within half an hour they'll march on the fort, and then on to the plateaus. They'll send my escort before they go, but you and Lehn will have to wait until they come back. You can think of me while you're waiting to die, MacIan; me, going to Lhiva and freedom!"

MacIan didn't answer. The rhythm of the rain changed from a slow drumming to a rapid, vicious hiss; he could see it, almost smoking in the broad leaves of the _liha_-trees. The drops cut his body like whips, and he realized for the first time that he was stripped to trousers and shirt. Without his protective rubber coverall, Thekla could electrocute him far quicker even than a Nahali, with his service

pistol.

The hut, which had been very close, was suddenly far off, so far he could hardly see it. The muddy ground swooped and swayed underfoot. MacIan jerked himself savagely erect. Fever. Any fool who prowled the swamp without proper covering was a sure victim. He looked back at Thekla, safe in helmet and coverall, grinning like a weasel under the shelter of a pod-hung tree-branch.

The hut came back into proper perspective. Aching, trembling suddenly with icy cold, he stooped and entered. Lehn lay there, dry but stripped like MacIan, his young face slack in unconsciousness. MacIan raised a hand, let it fall limply back. Lehn was still paralyzed from the shock. It might be hours, even days before he came out of it. Perhaps never, if he wasn't cared for properly.

MacIan must have gone a little mad then, from the fever and the shock to his own brain, and Thekla. He took Lehn's shirt in both hands and shook him, as though to beat sense back into his brain, and shouted at him in hoarse savagery.

"All I wanted was to die! That's what I came to the Legion for, to die like a soldier because I couldn't live like an officer. But it had to be honorably, Lehn! Otherwise...."

He broke off in a fit of shivering, and his blue eyes glared under his white, tumbled hair. "You robbed me of that, damn you! You and Thekla. You trapped me. You wouldn't even let me die decently. I was an officer, Lehn, like you. Do you hear me, young fool? I had to choose between two courses, and I chose the wrong one. I lost my whole command. Twenty-five hundred men, dead.

"They might have let me off at the court-martial. It was an honest mistake. But I didn't wait. I resigned. All I wanted was to die like a good soldier. That's why I volunteered. And you tricked me, Lehn! You and Thekla."

He let the limp body fall and crouched there, holding his throbbing head in his hands. He knew he was crying, and couldn't stop. His skin burned, and he was cold to the marrow of his bones.

Suddenly he looked at Lehn out of bright, fever-mad eyes. "Very well," he whispered. "I won't die. You can't kill me, you and Thekla, and you go on believing I betrayed you. I'll take you back, you two, and fight it out. I'll keep the Nahali from taking the fort, so you can't say I sold it out. I'll make you believe me!"

From somewhere, far off, he heard Thekla laugh.

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MacIan huddled there for some time, his brain whirling. Through the rain-beat and the fever-mist in his head and the alternate burning and freezing that racked his body, certain truths shot at him like stones from a sling.

Thekla had a gun that shot a stream of electricity. A gun designed for Nahali, whose nervous systems were built to carry a certain load and no more, like any set of wires. The low frequency discharge was strong enough to kill a normal man only under ideal conditions; and these conditions were uniquely ideal. Wet clothes, wet skin, wet ground, even the air saturated.

Then there were metal and rubber. Metal in his belt, in Lehn's belt; metal mesh, because the damp air rotted everything else. Rubber on his feet, on Lehn's feet. Rubber was insulation. Metal was a conductor.

MacIan realized with part of his mind that he must be mad to do what he planned to do. But he went to work just the same.

Ten minutes later he left the hut and crossed the soaking clearing in the downpour. Thekla had left the _liha_-tree for a hut directly opposite Lehn's; he rose warily in the doorway, gun ready. His sly black eyes took in MacIan's wild blue gaze, the fever spots burning on his lean cheekbones, and he smiled.

"Get on back to the hut," he said. "Be a pity if you die before the Nahali have a chance to try electro-therapy."

MacIan didn't pause. His right arm was hidden behind his back. Thekla's jaw tightened. "Get back or I'll kill you!"

MacIan's boots sucked in the mud. The beating rain streamed from his white hair, over his craggy face and gaunt shoulders. And he didn't hesitate.

Thekla's pointed teeth gleamed in a sudden snarl. His thumb snapped the trigger; a bolt of blue flame hissed toward the striding Scot.

MacIan's right hand shot out in the instant the gun spoke. One of Lehn's rubber boots cased his arm almost to the shoulder, and around the ankle of it a length of metal was made fast; two mesh belts linked together. The spitting blue fire was gathered to the metal circle, shot down the coupled lengths, and died in the ground.

The pistol sputtered out as a coil fused. Thekla cursed and flung it at MacIan's head. The Scot dodged it, and broke into a run, dropping Lehn's boot that his hands might be free to grapple.

Thekla fought like a low-canal rat, but MacIan was bigger and beyond himself with the first madness of fever. He beat the little Martian down and bound him with his own belt, and then went looking for his clothes and gun.

He found them, with Lehn's, in the hut next door. His belt pouch yielded quinine; he gulped a large dose and felt better. After he had dressed, he went and wrestled Lehn into his coverall and helmet and dragged him out beside Thekla, who was groaning back to consciousness in the mud.

Looking up, MacIan saw three Nahali men watching him warily out of scarlet eyes as they slunk toward him.

Thekla's escort. And it was a near thing. Twice clammy paws seared his face before he sent them writhing down into the mud, jerking as the overload beat through their nervous systems. Triangular mouths gaped in noseless faces, hand-like paws tore convulsively at scaly breast-plates, and MacIan, as he watched them die, said calmly:

"There will be hundreds of them storming the fort. My gun won't be enough. But somehow I've got to stop them."

No answer now. He shrugged and kicked Thekla erect. "Back to the fort, scut," he ordered, and laughed. The linked belts were fastened now around Thekla's neck, the other end hooked to the muzzle of MacIan's gun, so that the slightest rough pull would discharge it. "What if I stumble?" Thekla snarled, and MacIan answered, "You'd better not!"

Lehn was big and heavy, but somehow MacIan got him across his shoulders. And they started off.

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The fringe of the swamp was in sight when MacIan's brain became momentarily lucid. Another dose of quinine drove the mists back, so that the fort, some fifty yards away, assumed its proper focus. MacIan dropped Lehn on his back in the mud and stood looking, his hand ready on his gun.

The village swarmed with swamp-rats in the slow, watery dawn. They were ranged in a solid mass along the edges of the moat, and the fort's guns were silent MacIan wondered why, until he saw that the dam that furnished power for the turbine had been broken down.

Thekla laughed silently. "My idea, MacIan. The Nahali would never have thought of it themselves. They can't drown, you know. I showed them how to sneak into the reservoir, right under the fort's guns, and stay

under water, loosening the stones around the spillway. The pressure did the rest. Now there's no power for the big guns, nor the conductor rods in the moat."

He turned feral black eyes on MacIan. "You've made a fool of yourself. You can't stop those swamp-rats from tearing the fort apart. You can't stop me from getting away, after they're through. You can't stop Lehn from thinking what he does. You haven't changed anything by these damned heroics!"

"Heroics!" said MacIan hoarsely, and laughed. "Maybe." With sudden viciousness he threw the end of the linked belts over a low _liha_-branch, so that Thekla had to stand on tiptoe to keep from strangling. Then, staring blindly at the beleagured fort, he tried to beat sense out of his throbbing head.

"There was something," he whispered. "Something I was saying back in the swamp. Something my mind was trying to tell me, only I was delirious. What was it, Thekla?"

The Martian was silent, the bloody grin set on his dark face. MacIan took him by the shoulders and shook him. "What was it?"

Thekla choked and struggled as the metal halter tightened. "Nothing, you fool! Nothing but Nahali and _liha_-trees."

"_Liha_-trees!" MacIan's fever-bright eyes went to the great green pollen-pods hung among the broad leaves. He shivered, partly with chill, partly with exultation. And he began like a madman to strip Lehn and Thekla of their rubber coveralls.

Lehn's, because it was larger, he tented over two low branches. Thekla's he spread on the ground beneath. Then he tore down pod after pod from the _liha_-tree, breaking open the shells under the shelter of the improvised tent, pouring out the green powder on the groundcloth.

When he had a two-foot pile, he stood back and fired a bolt of electricity into the heart of it.

Thick, oily black smoke poured up, slowly at first, then faster and faster as the fire took hold. A sluggish breeze was blowing out of the swamp, drawn by the cooler uplands beyond the fort; it took the smoke and sent it rolling toward the packed and struggling mass on the earthworks.

Out on the battlefield, Nahali stiffened suddenly, fell tearing convulsively at their bodies. The beating rain washed the soot down onto them harder and harder, streaked it away, left a dull film over the reptilian skins, the scaly breast-plates. More and more of them fell

as the smoke rolled thicker, fed by the blackened madman under the _liha_-tree, until only Legionnaires were left standing in its path, staring dumbly at the stricken swamp-rats.

The squirming bodies stilled in death. Hundreds more, out on the edges of the smoke, seeing their comrades die, fled back into the swamp. The earthworks were cleared. Ian MacIan gave one wild shout that carried clear to the fort. Then he collapsed, crouched shivering beside the unconscious Lehn, babbling incoherently.

Thekla, strained on tiptoe under the tree-branch, had stopped smiling.

The fever-mists rolled away at last. MacIan woke to see Lehn's pink young face, rather less pink than usual, bending over him.

Lehn's hand came out awkwardly. "I'm sorry, MacIan. Thekla told me; I made him. I should have known." His grey eyes were ashamed. MacIan smiled and gripped his hand with what strength the fever had left him.

"My own fault, boy. Forget it."

Lehn sat down on the bed. "What did you do to the swamp-rats?" he demanded eagerly. "They all have a coating as though they'd been dipped in paraffin!"

MacIan chuckled. "In a way, they were. You know how they breathe; each skin cell forming a miniature electrolysis plant to extract oxygen from water. Well, it extracts hydrogen too, naturally, and the hydrogen is continually being given off, just as we give off carbon dioxide.

"Black smoke means soot, soot means carbon. Carbon plus hydrogen forms various waxy hydrocarbons. Wax is impervious to both water and air. So when the oily soot from the smoke united with the hydrogen exuded from the Nahali's bodies, it sealed away the life-giving water from the skin-cells. They literally smothered to death, like an Earthly ant doused with powder."

Lehn nodded. He was quiet for a long time, his eyes on the sick-bay's well-scrubbed floor. At length, he said:

"My offer still goes, MacIan. Officer's examinations. One mistake, an honest one, shouldn't rob you of your life. You don't even know that it would have made any difference if your decision had been the other way. Perhaps there was no way out."

MacIan's white head nodded on the pillow.

"Perhaps I will, Lehn. Something Thekla said set me thinking. He said he'd rather die on Mars than live another month in exile. I'm an exile

too, Lehn, in a different way. Yes, I think I'll try it. And if I fail again--" he shrugged and smiled--"there are always Nahali."

It seemed for a minute after that as though he had gone to sleep. Then he murmured, so low that Lehn had to bend down to hear him:

"Thekla will hang after the court-martial. Can you see that they take him back to Mars, first?"

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